Shattered; Unshattered

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by pinkskyline

Summary

Will wakes up from a coma. He remembers everything, including his plunge with Hannibal off the cliff, but no one else does. Everyone else, it seems, has been taking a slow path while Will skipped ahead to the end. Hannibal hasn't framed Will for murder yet, and Abigail hasn't faked her death. Can Will use his foreknowledge of events to come to make things better, or is he doomed to repeat his old mistakes, or worse, make new ones?

Notes

Translation into Chinese in progress by the wonderful Mor.

Part 1: Chapter 1

Will wakes up.

He's in a private hospital room—generic, institutional. He can't see out the window to gauge what town he's in. He's not hooked up to any machines.

He expects a lot of things in that moment, but Alana Bloom sitting by his bed holding his hand as she wipes a tear from her eye is not one of them.

He clears his throat, and she lets go of his hand. A few moments later there's ice chips in his mouth and the pain in his throat is still there but it doesn't seem as outlandish a notion that he might speak as it had before. He tries. "What happened?" he asks.

He remembers what happened. The Red Dragon. The blood, black in the moonlight. An embrace, and a plunge that might be betrayal if Hannibal hadn't seemed kind of into it at the time.

"You got hit by a car," she says.

Will closes his eyes and repeats the words to himself a couple of times but they make no sense no matter how many times he says it. Where would a car have come into the story that night? Did they fall, and Hannibal saved him only to push him in front of a car? Did they survive and run off together and then Will got hit by a car? Maybe Hannibal manipulated his injuries from the fall to seem like injuries from a car accident. Will inwardly grimaces. He has to stop giving the Hannibal in his head godlike powers. Hannibal's obnoxious enough about comparing himself to a god without Will doing it, too.

Will struggles to find a way to ask Alana what the hell she's doing in his hospital room and if she would leave him alone and go back to her family, please, but then something he had seen but not noticed cements itself into meaning in his mind. "You're not limping."

She'd got up, alerted the doctor of his awaked state, and she'd bustled about the room. No cane, no limp. Had he been unconscious for so long that she'd had some kind of miracle surgery? Grim, to imagine he'd lost even more years to recovering from Hannibal and the things Hannibal made him do.

But the look she gives him is uncomprehending. As if she had no idea what he meant. No context to give her understanding of the idea of her limping.

She puts a hand on his forehead and smiles kindly. "I'm happy to tell you that whatever reason you think I have a limp isn't real. You could have experienced coma dreams and confused them with reality. People often do. Or you've been experiencing delusions. Hallucinations. Not caused by mental instability or the work you do, but by a physical ailment." She then proceeds to give him the rundown on encephalitis, but Will has heard enough about that damned disease for three lifetimes, so cuts her off.

“You of all people should know that I know what encephalitis is by this point,” he says, feeling his jaw start to hurt the way it does when he’s been clenching it too hard. He takes a couple of deep breaths. “What happened to Hannibal? Is he dead?”

Alana blinks several times and sits back. “Why would Hannibal be dead? Will, he’s been at your bedside this entire time. I finally persuaded him to go home and get a good night’s sleep about an hour ago. He’s been beating himself up for not recognizing the signs. And I’ve been doing the same. I can’t believe…when I think that I just…assumed you were losing your mind when you were always so hot. I saw sweat on your face so many times. I felt your forehead and it never occurred to me to take you to a doctor! I knew you were hearing things. You confided to me about the animals you were hearing. I should have made the connection and realized it was neurological.”

Will struggles to sit up straight, uncomfortable at Alana seeing him this way now that his mind is clearing. He doesn’t hate her but he hasn’t felt friendly towards her in a long time. He resists the urge to say that assuredly she and Hannibal are both terrible doctors in their own ways. He moves his jaw from side to side, trying to ease the tension. “Hannibal’s home? In his…house?” He knows he sounds like someone relearning English after a head injury but there’s no way Hannibal could go from breaking out of prison to just…home. Nothing made sense.

Alana gets the look on her face she gets when she thinks about Hannibal and smiles fondly, and it’s the fondness that makes him realize that he’s not in a place he recognizes anymore. “I think he’s making you chicken soup.”

Will feels hollowed out, like someone who woke up after being embalmed, unaccountably alive in spite of his organs laying outside his body on a tray somewhere nearby. He feels on the edge of panic. “How long have I been asleep?”

“Three weeks. We, Hannibal and I, had worries about if you’d wake up at all. The doctors wanted to pull the plug at one point but Hannibal was adamant that you were stronger than you seemed.”

That tracks, Will thinks. Hannibal would be loath to let him die in any universe. Too much fun toying with him. “What was I doing when I got hurt? Was I working a case?”

“You’d just come home from Grafton. I think you were at the grocery store,” she says, and she smiles that very particular smile she used to have just for him, and he realizes. He’s somehow woken up before Abigail and her ear. Before Alana had lost all faith in him. Before Georgia Madchen or Dr. Sutcliffe were even dead. Grafton was the place with the human totem pole. That’s the place he was. That was the time.

So was it real, or was everything Will remembered afterward, as Alana had suggested moments before, a hallucination?

Imagine if “Hannibal Lecter is the Chesapeake Ripper” is nothing but a fever dream. Hannibal is a mild-mannered psychiatrist by day and foodie by night and nothing more. The operatic events Will remembers nothing more than the unconscious dance of the people he

knows in a disordered mind. It is dangerously plausible. Seductive, even. It would be easy to forget what he thinks he knows.

But what if he, for lack of a better term, dreamt the truth? What if his empathy extrapolated from what it knew about Hannibal, and it told him the truth about what would happen to Will if he stayed in Hannibal's sphere of influence? What if Hannibal is the Chesapeake Ripper, but Will learned the truth about him before Hannibal could discredit him this time?

Or what if time really can reverse itself?

Will tears at his bedding, ignoring Alana's alarm as he exposes his belly. There's not a single scar. Will feels a twinge of loss he doesn't understand because even when he acknowledged his…feelings…for Hannibal he had never liked the scar or the suffering that had come with it. Familiarity is still familiarity. This abdomen doesn't belong to him. This life feels…wrong. He absently rubs at the scar on his forehead and it's absent. It's like, suddenly, pieces of Will are disappearing and he looks down at his legs to make sure they haven't disappeared, too. He sees his feet but can't move them, and the ensuing panic persuades Alana to call a nurse who administers a sedative.

And then it's all. Calm.

When Will wakes up again, Jack has taken Alana's spot.

"Hi Jack," Will says.

"I've got a bone to pick with you," Jack says. "You should have been taking better care of yourself, Will."

"This infection I had kept me from thinking clearly. I couldn't take care of myself because I was having waking seizures and hallucinations."

"I know, Will. But anyone else would have seen a medical doctor about that."

"I was seeing doctors. Hannibal should have diagnosed it, if he's so brilliant."

Jack nods. "You're right, but he's been beating himself up about it quite a bit. I know it must be tempting to confront him about it but I don't know if you should. Nobody's perfect and he blames himself enough already. Will, he's devastated. If you blame him for this illness, which he didn't cause, by the way, it might cause hard feelings and you won't be able to continue as his patient."

Will pushes up on his elbows and Jack reaches over and hands him the bed controls. Funny, that Jack knew how that all worked but Alana either didn't know or didn't think of it before. Terrible bedside manner. Jack must have learned the last time his wife was in the hospital.

Will sits up. "I was never really his patient. And I don't see why I need to see him anymore, now that my brain's no longer on fire."

"Alana's concerns about your state of mind predate the period of time when you likely had this illness."

Will grimaces a smile. “Alana’s not my doctor or my mom and what she thinks I need really doesn’t concern me. If you want to let her scold you that’s your business but her opinion about it shouldn’t put conditions on my employment. She was worried about my inability to pull the trigger on a murderer—well, I got past that on my first case. When I get out of this bed I want to go back into the field without a babysitter, if you’ll still have me.”

Jack…does not seem displeased with this. Of course he wouldn’t be. Less people telling him to give Will a break, take it easy on him? Of course he let himself be convinced. His smile is a little smug when he says, “If you’re sure.”

Will runs a hand through his hair, frowning when it feels greasy and pulling his hand away. “I think I was sedated before when I realized my legs wouldn’t move. But I can sit up. I don’t have a spinal injury, do I?”

Jack smiles. “No, not at all. Your leg muscles have atrophied a little. No big deal. You might need physical therapy. From the coma, not from the fight you got into with the car. Your injuries actually weren’t that bad—a concussion, mainly, which made them do an MRI and some other tests which made them think the head injury was worse than it was, because of the swelling your brain was already doing.”

Will’s eyes narrow. “I assume Hannibal has been helping you with cases? Catch me up, would you?”

Jack describes Georgia Madchen’s case, though the team hasn’t made a lot of progress without him. Not officially, anyway. Knowing Hannibal he’s probably been having tea and cookies with her for weeks. And it’s a relief to Will because it means that his memory of the years to come is real, but at the same time it’s not. Part of him covets the years he’s lost, but a deeper part of him is just so tired at the thought of living them over again. But then—

“Hey boss, we need you,” Beverly says.

Beverly. She’s standing in the doorway wearing tight, dark clothes, and she looks amazing. Beautiful. Her hair falls down as she moves, obscuring one side of her face, and Will shudders with the memory of seeing her. In sections.

Will feels his eyes well with tears. If he changes things, if he drags himself back through those years with Hannibal once more but does it better this time, if the goddamned teacup comes together, he can save Beverly. Abigail. Georgia. Hell, even Chilton didn’t deserve all the suffering he and Hannibal put him through.

He’d like to pre-emptively kill Mason Verger, though. What better way to get revenge than to do it before the person you want to get revenge on has even done anything to you? And he could honestly care less if Margot found killing Mason therapeutic or got her share of the Verger money; she wasn’t demented but that made all the morally questionable things she’d done or helped her brother get away with all the more reprehensible. Maybe being poor would help her become a better person—or she’d just have a child without Mason around to stop her. Will feels a bubble of mad laughter in his throat. He’d thought Hannibal sounded crazier talking about the damned teacup than he’d ever sounded talking about eating human flesh, and now Will had somehow managed to convince himself Hannibal was right about it.

Will is a time traveler with foreknowledge. Maybe Hannibal was right about him being one of the gods.

Or about them sharing madness.

It's madness. Absurd. Maybe he's dead and this is hell. Eternal damnation. Hannibal would be so pleased to know that he could play with different endings for eternity. To live different lives and create different monsters with his manipulations.

"The mind is its own place and in itself, can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven," Will mumbles.

"I'm trying to be sympathetic to your illness and pass along Jimmy and Brian's awkward well wishes and you're just quoting Paradise Lost at me, Will. Are you sure they unscrambled your brain?" Beverly asks. She crosses her arms and grins. "They're supposed to be making you better, not making an omelette."

Will had idealized her, he realizes. It floods back, how abrasive she could be. The thought fills him with fondness. "Sorry. Just thinking about things. My mind works just fine. According to Jack I just need some physical therapy and I'll be back on the job soon."

They leave, and Will's doctors finally show up. Jack seems to know what he's talking about, as they say he needs some physical therapy and he'll have to take some drugs for a while for the encephalitis, but he'll make a full recovery. He's annoyed that Jack managed to get such current and correct information on his health. He doesn't remember authorizing that—though he imagines Jack yelled and they just told him. He asks them to transfer him to another facility—one Jack and Alana and god willing Hannibal don't know he's at, and he begins to recover.

He'll need to be completely healthy to match wits with Hannibal again.

Chapter 2

Will completes his physical therapy with the single-minded efficacy of someone who doesn't mind pain because nothing feels as bad as your best friend trying to saw open your skull without anesthetic. Or disemboweling you. He expects that Hannibal will find him before he finishes his course of physical therapy, but that isn't the case. Will isn't sure if he's disappointed or pleased. It could mean one of several things.

Hannibal knows Will is in control of his facilities now. Maybe he's busy filling Will's house with parts of dead girls (it'll be a shame to throw out all his flies, but that's definitely Will's first stop when he gets home. In fact, he might have to throw out a good many of his belongings, just to be sure). Maybe he's lost interest in Will altogether because his brain won't be as fun anymore. Maybe he's enjoying playing Will Graham and consulting for the FBI. Maybe he'll get a taste for being Will Graham and try to kill Will to make it permanent because setting him up is less feasible now. Maybe he just doesn't think throwing his weight around to see Will is worth the risk considering the fact that Will is so dependent on him he is likely to come crawling back on his own.

Will takes a taxi to his little house in Wolf Trap and is disturbed to find it shut up and shuttered. Of course it would have to be. He gets the furnace running, turns the water on and texts Alana asking about his dogs. She responds that she'll bring them right over.

Hopefully she won't be banging Hannibal this time, although to be fair to Hannibal sleeping with Alana was a good strategy. It was a way to keep Will from gaining a support system and she would always be a good alibi—an eager witness to Hannibal's sanity. Will wondered if she'd ever volunteered for psych experiments when she was in school and if Hannibal had brainwashed her somehow to see him as sane and well-meaning. Forget his questionable actions, the suits alone would lead anyone rational to think he had some kind of personality disorder, and then there was the harpsichord and the calligraphy.

He doesn't care that much anymore who Alana sleeps with, but he doesn't like the idea of Hannibal sleeping with her. Is it jealousy? He had been the focus of Hannibal's obsession for years, and now he is back in a time where the man probably feels the same lukewarm interest in Will that he felt for Randall Tier, Margot Verger, Bedelia Du Maurier and all the other patients he tried to persuade to become killers. Nothing out of the ordinary—just an amusement. A perk of the job of psychiatry and, as a bonus, a window into the methods of the BSU.

He could leave. He could find Molly—or someone like her—and just. Move on. Leave it all behind.

He could keep everyone safe by sending Hannibal to prison. He could make Hannibal a viable suspect without seeming crazy this time. That would save Abigail, Beverly. Probably Georgia Madchen, if he could still find her.

“But do you ache for him?” the Bedelia in his memory intones in her annoyingly hypnotic voice.

If he exposes Hannibal, the game will end, but that would mean the game would end. And after all the years of madness and obsession, he can’t stand the thought of the game ending. He’d tried it with Molly, and it hadn’t worked. It had worked, and he had liked it. At first it had been easy to sink into Molly’s simple, earthy worldview. Every day with her had uncoiled another tense muscle and made Will feel a bit more human. But the human suit had started to chafe after a while. It was like getting dressed for a funeral and realizing your only suit’s too tight, and having to sit there all day while the suit dug into your skin, but that was his whole life, day in and day out. And what was the payoff? He got to claim he was a moral man, a good man. Those are concepts he doesn’t even believe in anymore. He’d pretended, because otherwise he’d have to say Hannibal had won. But maybe Hannibal winning wasn’t the world’s biggest tragedy.

Besides, he couldn’t go back to a normal life after seeing the blood in the moonlight; after killing with Hannibal.

If he plays the game right now, without Hannibal making the mistake of putting him in prison and missing him—missing his faith and regard—would Hannibal see him as just another pig? He’d had the chance at an acolyte too many times and killed the pretender for Will to take it for granted that if he simply told Hannibal he knew who he was and wanted to be with him anyway that Hannibal would be pleased and they could run away together.

He didn’t want to be Randall Tier, or Tobias Budge. He needed to excite the same sympathy and regard for Hannibal that the dream version of him had, but without going to the insane asylum.

He really didn’t want to go to the insane asylum.

Was it simply his absence that had made Hannibal realize his regard for Will, or was it the suffering he’d caused Will? Did he think Will suffered beautifully? How far did Hannibal’s sadism go?

And how far did Will’s masochism go? Did he really want to stay in Hannibal’s orbit? He hadn’t had a choice, before, but to walk into it with open eyes just seems…wrong. He’d thought he had no choice on the clifftop—that he couldn’t live with Hannibal and he couldn’t live without him. But was this really the only way?

Barking takes him out of his head. He sees Alana posed to knock through the window and gets up and opens the door. He crouches down to greet his dogs enthusiastically and smiles up at Alana. “Thanks for taking them.”

Alana gives him a cautious smile. “I was so pleased to hear from you. Hannibal and I have been so worried. We’re not entirely sure why you chose to exclude us from your care. And then Jack said he didn’t know where you were either.”

Will stands. “I just wanted to get better. No fuss, you know? I’m not the coworkers visiting me in the hospital type.”

Alana rears back, even flinches slightly. “I would have thought we’re more than coworkers to each other. If not Hannibal and Jack, then at least me.”

Will leans on the doorjamb. He should ask her in but obscurely, he doesn’t want her in the house. He crosses his arms. “I had a lot of things to think about. Whether the things I was doing before my health scare are the things I want from life. I reassessed. I needed some distance from everyone I knew to do that.”

Alana nods. “And now?”

Will shrugs. “And now I’m going back to work.”

“Jack says you’re not going back to Hannibal or any therapist. That you think you don’t need it anymore since you’ve been treated for encephalitis.”

Will finally caves and walks further into the house, the dogs and Alana following. Alana closes the door behind her.

Will gestures to the disarray. “Don’t mind the mess. I don’t know who shut the house up but they weren’t gentle about it.”

Alana shrugs. “I think Jack said he sent some trainees. Will, you need therapy to do the job you do. You need to work through the trauma.”

“How do you know? You’re not my doctor. You’re not my mother and you’re certainly not my girlfriend. I was unstable. I was fragile. Yes. But there was a physical cause and now that’s been resolved. I’ll see the psychiatrist the FBI has on staff if I shoot someone again, but otherwise, I should be treated the same as anyone else. Treating me so different from everyone else is honestly prejudicial.”

Alana’s eyes widen. “Will, I’m just looking out for you.”

“Well, stop. No one asked you to. You say my condition, whatever it is, means I’m different from anyone else, but it doesn’t follow that being different means I’m falling apart. Why can’t it mean that you can’t predict how I’ll react to vicarious violence? If there’s no word for what I am, why does that mean you know what I need to be healthy so much better than I could possibly know for myself?”

“I didn’t know you resented me so much.”

Will rolls his eyes. “I don’t resent you. I just don’t think you know what’s best for me—and I don’t even want to hear your opinion on what’s best for me anymore. I’m not actually sure why you’d think I’d be interested. What does Hannibal think? Is he okay with my decision?”

“You should talk to Hannibal yourself about that. Have you contacted him, Will? He’s been inconsolable about the fact that you didn’t wait to see him before you had yourself transferred to the rehab facility. He thinks you hate him for failing you. I think he feels a little silly for sitting vigil for so many days when you woke up and didn’t seem to want him at all. He’s hurt.”

Will shudders. “I can just imagine you and Jack and Hannibal all sitting around and gossiping about my mental health like a bunch of old ladies. I don’t need it. I don’t want it. It’s invasive and maybe even a breach of privacy.”

“Your language around this is sounding very lawyerlike, Will. Have you spoken to a lawyer? Are you planning on suing Hannibal or the FBI? Or both?”

Will laughs dryly and crosses his arms. “I probably should. I just want to be left alone. If I feel unstable, I’ll find someone to see on my own. If you or Jack have a problem with that, I guess I don’t have to consult with Jack anymore.”

Alana tosses her hair, and sets her mouth. “Well, I guess you can’t be much clearer than that. I’d always heard you were arrogant. Harsh. I’d never really seen it for myself but I guess you’re right. You weren’t yourself when I knew you best.”

Will really wants to ask her what it says about her that she’d only found him attractive when he was falling apart, but he resists the urge. She’s basically well-meaning and hasn’t even done most of the things he’s angry with her for. She has the potential to be that person, but she isn’t yet. Right now she’s just hurt, and he’s the one who hurt her.

“Thanks for taking the dogs. I’m sorry if all of this was hard to hear.”

Alana tilts her head. “You really are different now. No hiding behind your glasses. No stuttering. There’s a confidence to you I don’t recognize. I wonder if you—”

“If you don’t stop wondering about me I’m gonna start calling you Chilton,” Will jokingly warns.

Alana laughs. “A good reminder. You’re allowed your boundaries, Will, and I’m sorry if you feel like we violated them. I’m sorry if I did anything to make you think you couldn’t trust me not to poke my head into your brain.”

“You’re forgiven.”

When Alana leaves, Will wonders if he can trust Alana’s conviction that Hannibal was inconsolable without him. That he’d hurt Hannibal. Hurting Hannibal was dangerous, to be sure, but it might serve his purposes. But he couldn’t simply be an absence. He had to be an absence and a lure. He had to see Hannibal one more time before disappearing from his life. Dangle a conversation, a moment of understanding in front of him, and then yank it away. Make sure Hannibal would follow the lure.

He’d see Hannibal at work, and maybe that was enough of an enticement. They would have that shared understanding and secret language together but it would be in front of others. It would lack the intimacy of their little talks. It might be enough to make Hannibal ache for more.

When dealing with Hannibal, it’s death to set plans in stone. Will needs to be flexible, to have a goal, and to pursue it by any means necessary. As a general goal, he wants to keep Hannibal’s focus on him and away from other people who might not be able to fight him off

as effectively. Who might not be able to withstand his regard. Urgently, he needs to make sure Abigail and Georgia Madchen are safe and far away from Hannibal, and to mitigate or neutralize any plans of Hannibal's to make Will seem like an insane murderer. Less urgently, he wants to put a flea in Matthew Brown's ear about the identity of the Chesapeake Ripper.

Just to see what happens.

Chapter 3

Will manages to convince Abigail to come with him to find Georgia Madchen fairly easily. She's bored, evidently. They agree to meet several days after they decide to go to Greenwood, so that people won't realize they're together. Maybe he channels Hannibal's manipulative nature for a minute or maybe Abigail is desperate for a solution to her problems that doesn't involve Hannibal. Understandably.

They go to Greenwood to find Georgia. Abigail is amenable to his vagaries about why and how he knows Georgia needs their help, and they find her. It's not that different from how it happened in his coma dream; he tells Georgia she's alive and she seeks him out, but this time he's in a hotel room. He makes sure he doesn't fall asleep because he doesn't have his dogs around him to alert him to her presence, but he's able to talk her down. She doesn't have to admit anything about killing anyone, though, because he's not technically working yet.

Abigail and Georgia bond quickly and fiercely in the way girls their age do, and Will sees he was right to entrust Georgia to Abigail. Abigail needs someone to care for, and they both feel the weight of murders that weren't entirely of their making.

Abigail and Georgia decide to visit Georgia's childhood pen pal in Canada, and they all hope that Canada will treat Georgia's medical problems for free if she throws herself on their mercy with a diagnosis. She looks pathetic enough. Will buys them a reliable but unattractive used car, gives them a large part of his life savings, hopes they don't kill each other, and washes his hands of the situation.

Well, that's what he'd joke if he had anyone to talk to about his crazy schemes, but since he's either delusional or potentially breaking the fabric of time, he keeps it to himself.

Will spends the rest of his money on some second-hand but (he's told) nice designer clothes and a haircut.

But first, he has to return to work.

Beverly is the first person he sees when he walks into the lab. "Looking sharp, Will! Nearly dying looks good on you."

Will raises his eyebrows. "Rarely is gallows humor so literal."

"What's with the fancy getup? You got a job interview after this?"

Will notices Hannibal approaching, smiles slightly at him and turns back to finish his conversation with Beverly. "I had some time off after I got out of the hospital and I decided to purge some things. Got some new clothes and some new furniture."

"Will, you look like a new man. I'm so pleased to see you back at work," Hannibal says.

Will narrows his eyes. “Are you sure? You’re not enjoying being Will Graham so much you’d rather I don’t come back at all?”

Hannibal smiles and puts a hand on Will’s shoulder. “No one could ever really fill your shoes, Will. We’ve been doing our best but you were very much missed.”

Zeller walks up. “Will! We’re stumped on like five cases and we could really use some Will Graham magic.”

It’s by far the nicest thing Zeller has ever said to him, and Will wonders for a moment if Hannibal has been being less insightful than he could be on purpose to make Will seem more brilliant, but then remembers that even when Hannibal had ‘been him’ before, Will had been helping Beverly from jail. Or maybe Hannibal had been going around killing all the serial killers he found and not telling the team like he did with the Muralist James Grey.

Will could hardly complain, though, when he had just sent two suspects off to Canada to escape justice himself.

Zeller hands Will a pile of files and Will sighs. “Maybe I should take these back to my classroom. Come back when I’ve got something.”

“Will! Wonderful to see you again,” Jack bellows a touch too heartily as he walks in the room.

Will grimaces a smile. “I’m beginning to think someone forgot to pick up the welcome back cake and there’s an internal memo telling everyone to be really friendly so I don’t notice.”

“That, is where you would be wrong,” Price says. He takes a hand from behind his back and presents Will with a cupcake in an ornate clear plastic box with flourish.

Will is alarmed to find himself actually touched. And a touch guilty that he’s no longer the Will they remember. They wouldn’t want to be alone in a room with the Will they have now, and they’ll figure that out eventually. But for now, he thanks them profusely and makes his escape.

Hannibal, of course, follows him. “I thought I could fill in any blanks the files leave out. Answer any questions,” he says.

Will huffs a breath. He doesn’t bother saying it, but his whole thing is interpreting the evidence in a way that gives him the whole picture, even parts the files leave out or can’t know. At a late stage in the investigation when there’s a lot of evidence to draw from, Hannibal will probably be no help. But he likes the thought of working on the files with Hannibal there again. They’d always made a wonderful team.

When they get into the classroom Hannibal puts his hands on Will’s biceps and just holds him there. “I thought when you didn’t contact me you were angry with me, but it seems not. Please tell me if I’m mistaken.”

Will looks down at the cupcake. “Did you make this?”

“I did not. But if you’d allow me, I’d make you a meal at your convenience. I made you soup when you were ill but it never did get to you,” Hannibal’s voice is remarkably even. Will is pretty sure he’s not even holding Will’s absence against him. It’s hard to tell, though.

Will pulls himself out of Hannibal’s grasp and puts the files on the desk. He sets the cupcake on the corner of the desk where he can see it. “You know Beverly and Jack always made me feel welcome but the others always made me feel like the pariah of the office. It’s kind of nice to be appreciated—not that I like the attention. That was awkward as hell.”

“They do fine work every day and you walk in and perform what seems like magic, almost in defiance of the science they prize so highly. And Jack takes your word over theirs almost as a rule. It makes sense that could cause some resentment.”

Will tilts his head from side to side a few times. “And I guess I’m kind of a dick about it sometimes.” Will sits down in his chair and starts to open one of the files.

Hannibal puts a hand on it to keep it closed. “I know you’re anxious to get started, but I must ask you. Are you certain you no longer wish me to be your psychiatrist?”

“I thought you weren’t my psychiatrist. Not officially, anyway.”

“I hope at the very least I was your friend.”

Will leans back in his chair. “A better friend than psychiatrist, probably. You cooked me meals and feed my dogs when I was out of town. That’s a lot better than being a psychiatrist who insists a physical problem is a mental one and provides therapy that almost seems designed to undermine what stability I had.”

“Encephalitis is notoriously difficult to diagnose,” Hannibal says.

“Shame you couldn’t sniff it out earlier, huh?” Will says.

Hannibal doesn’t quite suppress a look of shock, but covers it by half-sitting on the side of Will’s desk. “Will, I know that right now you’re blaming me for your encephalitis—”

“Please stop saying encephalitis. I don’t want to talk about encephalitis. I really don’t.”

“It’s very common for a patient to blame a doctor for—”

“Hannibal, I’m really very busy right now. I’ve been away for a long time and I need to catch up. I’m going to look at these files and I’m going to report back to the team. If you want to have a seat and answer any questions, fine. Otherwise, maybe you should wait in the lab.”

There. Maybe Hannibal will think he’s rude and try to kill him. Or maybe he’ll start courting him as a friend again. It would be more of a challenge to do so now that he’s no longer keeping regular appointments, but he has faith that if Hannibal wants to endear himself to Will he’ll find a way.

Hannibal very quietly goes and sits at one of the student desks. Eventually Will takes pity on him and gives him some insights into Georgia Madchen’s crimes that allow Hannibal to

realize she has Cotard Syndrome and that sets the ball of the investigation rolling. He does what he can for the other files, but he's not sure if his breakthroughs will lead anywhere because he can't remember them. They must be ones the team handled while he was in the hospital before going to jail, in the coma dream.

Hannibal's eyes shine with intensity when he listens to Will describe the crimes. He's chasing the lure, but he's not quite on the hook.

Will gets up to walk back to the lab and Hannibal stops him once again. "Will, you've made your feelings rather clear. You don't want to be my friend, but you're willing to keep it professional, as I believe you once said."

"If my feelings are clear, what's your question?"

Hannibal fidgets with what appears to be honest distress, and Will inwardly chortles. "I suggest another dynamic. Perhaps we're not meant to be doctor and patient, or even friends."

"Are you asking me out?" Will asks, for kicks. He certain that's not what Hannibal means.

Hannibal huffs a genuine laugh. "Alana would really scold me then, for taking advantage of a patient. Former patient, I mean. No. Not a date. I wondered if you'd join me in a new undertaking."

"You're going to have to be more specific."

"I played chess as a child, with my father. I haven't played much in years. I wonder if you'd help me relearn the art."

Will wonders if Hannibal realizes how significant that sounds. The fact that he would share something with Will that had before only been a thing shared between father and son. It's so much more intimate than friendship, and Will is not entirely certain Hannibal realizes that. Hannibal has memorized an extensive set of manners but he's awkward as hell sometimes. Will decides to underplay the significance. "You sure you won't get sick of me? You see me all the time at work."

"I may not always be able to consult. I do have a private practice and patients who need me. I've enjoyed our talks and I think you've got a singular mind that I cannot abide the thought of no longer testing my own against. I understand that you've lost faith in my abilities as a therapist and that's soured our friendship, but if we go slowly, perhaps we can regain what we've lost. Plus, I would simply love to see what you could do with a game of strategy like chess. Perhaps you wouldn't be able to play at all, because my face and mannerisms would tell you my next moves, rendering the challenge moot."

Will considers. It would be a good way to keep an eye on Hannibal, and to spend time with him. It was undeniable to him at this point, that he wanted to spend time with Hannibal. But he needed Hannibal to miss him first. Maybe he really should sue him, because their lawyers would force them to have no contact with each other.

Before Will can reply Alana rushes into the room, flustered.

“Will, have you seen Abigail Hobbs?” she asks seriously.

Oh the irony. He sends Abigail off to Canada to protect her from Hannibal and now he’s going to be suspected of killing her all over again. But maybe she doesn’t mean it as an accusation. “No, why? Has she jumped over the wall again?”

“Will, she’s been gone two days. Freddie Lounds said that Abigail talked to you for hours last week. What did you talk about?”

Will frowns. “Fishing, mostly. Why?”

Hannibal gentles her by taking her hand. “Will doesn’t know what’s been happening. It’s unlikely he knows about Nicholas Boyle’s body resurfacing or Jack’s interrogation of Abigail.”

Alana puts a hand to her forehead. “Oh god. I’m so sorry, Will. I was supposed to come and say welcome back and I come here and panic all over you instead. I think Jack scared Abigail. Made her think that he knew something about her helping her father.”

“You think she helped him?” Will asks.

“Running makes what seemed likely into almost a certainty. I wish it wasn’t true. I know you had a lot of faith in her, Will. Please don’t let this undermine your confidence,” she says.

“I won’t, as long as you promise not to let mistaking my medical problem for mental instability for months undermine yours,” Will bites out.

Alana’s jaw clenches and she walks out of the room without another word.

“Alana is a good person and a good friend to the people she cares about. Alienating her is not in your best interests,” Hannibal says, but there’s no power to the scold. Will swears he’s smirking behind that blank mask he calls a face.

Will shrugs. “I guess I’m just not that nice a guy. Still want to play chess with me?”

Hannibal simply nods.

“I have some catching up to do with teaching and with cases. It won’t be right away, but chess could be fun. I’ll text you,” Will says.

“I shall look forward to hearing from you,” Hannibal says. “And now I suppose we should see what Jack has to say about Abigail.”

Will nods and follows Hannibal.

Chapter 4

Bedelia Du Maurier is not Will's favorite person. She isn't even top ten. But she's one of only two potential allies he has now that he's sent Abigail away.

That doesn't mean he thinks he can trust her. But he needs her on his side, or he needs her gone. When he was in prison she left town, and that and Will's absence made Hannibal lonely enough to move up his plans to implicate Chilton and let Will go. If he's cold to Hannibal, Hannibal will lean on her. There was definitely precedent for it, loath though Will is to admit it.

He doesn't know a lot about Bedelia. He read her book but most of it was fiction. Fascinating characterization but the pacing was a bit dicey. He needs to know more about her, so he stalks her.

He sees things in her that he is sure Hannibal saw and was drawn to. She exhibits casual cruelty and an antisocial desire for chaos. He's seen her spill drinks on people on purpose for no reason and make eyes at two different guys at once to try and start a fight.

More than anything, she seems bored.

She goes out to bars in areas that are just on the edge of turning questionable alone dressed to the nines. One night when he's following her, he approaches.

She looks him over and opens her mouth to deliver what's sure to be a devastating rejection, but Will stops her. "Bedelia Du Maurier? I'm Will Graham."

She blinks. She's too flat affect to betray much more surprise than that, but she takes another look and he can tell she recognizes him now. He always looks so different in TattleCrime pictures. "Sit down," she says.

"You're not worried I'm an obsessed former patient of your patient, here to do you harm?" Will asks.

"An obsessed patient would be unlikely to fire their psychiatrist," Bedelia says.

"I'm not here to do you harm," Will says, "I'm here because I need someone to talk to."

"I'm no longer a practicing psychiatrist. Hannibal is my only patient."

Will grimaces a smile. "Oh yeah? What's that like."

"I can't discuss Hannibal with you. It's a breach of confidentiality. That fact that you work for the FBI means this conversation is bordering on inappropriate already unless you have a warrant."

“I’m not here on behalf of the FBI. The FBI doesn’t see Hannibal the way I do. The way you do. They don’t see him at all,” Will says.

Bedelia takes a drink. “What exactly do you want from me? FBI or not, I can’t discuss Hannibal with you.”

“I don’t want to discuss Hannibal with you. I want to annoy Hannibal with you.”

Bedelia tilts her head. “What do you have in mind?”

“I think you know how close Hannibal’s feelings for me are to obsession. And he’s not obsessed with you, but he’s possessive of you. He thinks he owns you and he can position you how he likes and you’ll perform like his puppet. How would you feel about doing something out of character on purpose to provoke him?”

“Provoking Hannibal would…potentially alienate him from the both of us,” she says.

“You can’t say it, but I can. I know he’s dangerous. He could kill either one of us if he sees what we do as betrayal. But maybe he’d do something completely different. Maybe he’ll let you go, if he sees you as inconvenient. Perhaps you would cease to be interesting.”

Bedelia takes another drink. Her hands shake. “This seems like a wild and precarious plan.”

“Yeah, but don’t you want to see what’ll happen?”

Bedelia sighs. “I can see why Hannibal’s so fascinated with you. I couldn’t understand it before, but I’m beginning to. What plan do you have, exactly, to provoke Hannibal?”

Will swallows. “I thought we could date. That would really throw Hannibal for a loop. To see the two people he wants hyper focused on him focused on each other instead.”

Bedelia looks quietly amused. “Hannibal would not find it believable that we were dating. You’re handsome enough, I suppose, in a cherubic sort of way, but you sat down at the bar at the beginning of this conversation without a drink and not one of the three bartenders tried to sell you one. You’re invisible. Not the kind of man I’m drawn to at all.”

“Hannibal thinks you’re drawn to him. Attracted to him. He mistakes fear for a yearning in you for his darkness—or maybe he’s not mistaken. It doesn’t really matter. What matters is Hannibal thinks he’s your type, and despite the disparities between our social status and how we dress and how we interact with the people around us, Hannibal thinks he and I are exactly alike. He would be more likely to believe you feel drawn to me than he would be to believe that you feel drawn to anyone else.”

Bedelia takes a deep breath. “Why would I do this? This sort of manipulation is…dangerous. I’m not currently a practicing psychiatrist, but if behaviour such as this ever got out, I’d never be able to practice again.”

“Behaviour like spilling drinks on people, starting fights, coming to a place like this dressed like you are? Are you hoping someone’ll try to rob you, so you’ll have an excuse to hurt them like you hurt that patient? People like us, who have a lot going on in our heads, we

intellectualize. We live our lives in a mental space that starts to feel almost hypothetical after a while. We start to wonder if we're even alive. If we're real. The physical, the visceral, the violent, feels real. Makes us feel alive."

She looks at Will for a long moment and then picks up her purse. "I've enjoyed our chat, but I think I'll go home now." She takes out a notebook and a pen and says, "Write down your number. I'll call you."

Will writes his number and says, "Does that mean you agree to my plan?"

"It means your plan has some merit," she says. She stands and pauses before she leaves. "I wonder why you're confident that I'm not going to go straight to Hannibal and tell him the exact contents of this conversation."

Will shrugs. "I know you'll do exactly what you think is in your best interests. If that means you tell Hannibal, I suppose I'll have to deal with whatever he does with that information."

Will lets her think about the pros and cons of his plan, and turns to the only other ally he can think of. Matthew Brown had become his admirer when he thought he'd killed people, but then he hadn't seemed to be any less admiring when he realized Will wasn't really a killer yet. He was an odd duck, probably drawn as much to Will's instability as his supposed ferocity.

He'd seen a weakness in Will that echoed a weakness in himself. A need for a companion. A desire to team up. Will found it a little baffling as he'd always been the last boy picked for teams in gym class and his ability to function on a team had gone downhill from there. The only person he worked well with was Hannibal, and that was because they were on a level that was beyond most people. Will supposes that Matthew Brown thinks of himself as being on that same level, and maybe he is. It's not like Will spent too much time getting to know him before he sent him off to kill Hannibal.

But how do you manipulate someone to go kill a man for you when they're not the president of your fan club?

And does he really want Hannibal to die? Matthew Brown, for all he seemed like a ridiculous side note in the games Hannibal and Will played, had come very close to killing Hannibal. If Alana and Jack hadn't intervened, he might have actually succeeded.

He knows he has to take the risk, because it's what Hannibal would do. And he's almost certain that Hannibal saw the attempt on his life as a key moment between him and Will. Something significant and important. Intimate, even if only by proxy. He would send someone after Will, and since everything was different now, it might be someone different than Randall Tier. And whoever he sent, Will might not survive this time.

But Will wanted to keep Hannibal's focus on him. It was safer for everyone that way. If he kept Hannibal looking at him he might spend his time messing with Will instead of the other, more vulnerable people around him.

A niggling thought that he has no reason to use a proxy when he isn't in prison tickles at his brain, but this way he has deniability. Hannibal might realize it was him, but everyone else could likely be convinced that Matthew Brown, with his history of mental illness, or at least, hospitalizations in mental health facilities, had come up with his plans on his own.

Besides, Matthew Brown is dangerous. If he's not a killer yet, he will be. If he sends Matthew after Hannibal and Hannibal kills him, that's another killer off the streets and a net gain.

He's not sure how to approach Matthew, so he stalks him, too. It's a boring way to spend his time and he misses his dogs, but it has to be done. He finds out that Matthew plays darts on Fridays, and he signs himself up for a game.

After the game, that Will loses, he joins Matthew for a beer.

"Where do you work?" Will asks.

"The Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane," Matthew says, like it's impressive.

"Wow. Actually, I've been there. Not as a patient. We were investigating claims that Abel Gideon was the Chesapeake Ripper."

Matthew smiles. "I thought you looked familiar and your name rang a bell. You're that Will Graham, aren't you? The one from the papers. I've read about you." He pauses, and then leans closer. "Do you think Abel Gideon really is the Chesapeake Ripper? I know what you told the papers, but what do you really think?"

"Not even close. He's a killer, but he's not that killer," Will says.

Matthew slaps the table. "I knew it! I knew it. What's it like, talking to all those people who kill people?"

Will shrugs. "Killing people is a pretty normal thing when you think about it. Police and soldiers kill people all the time."

Matthew gives Will a long look. "There's killing people and there's killing people. I know you know the difference. What kind of a guy do you think the Chesapeake Ripper really is? He can't be messy and unbalanced like Dahmer. He's got to be controlled. Neat."

Will laughs and leans forward. "I've got a little private theory about who the Ripper is. I'll tell you if you promise not to tell anyone. If my theory got exposed on TattleCrime.com or anywhere else, I'd probably lose my job because it sounds nuts. But I'm so convinced."

Matthew leans forward, too. "Tell me. You can trust me."

"You ever heard of Dr. Lecter? The guy they had working with me?"

Matthew nods. "I've seen his picture on TattleCrime.com. What about him?"

Will doesn't say anything, he just takes a drink of his beer.

Matthew blinks. “No way. A guy who actually consults with the FBI? Seriously?”

Will nods. “It’s farfetched, I know, but there’s so many boxes he ticks. He used to be a surgeon, so he’s got the surgical skills. He was an art student before that—and we both know the Ripper’s scenes, as gruesome as they are, are sheer artistry. And then, yeah, he consults with the FBI. You know how common it is for serial killers to offer to help the people investigating their crimes?”

“That’s…no way. You don’t really believe that, do you? You two seem like friends, at least from what Freddie Lounds says. Why would you be friends with a guy you think is a serial killer?”

Will looks at Matthew Brown very seriously for a moment, then his face splits into a grin. “No, of course I don’t believe that. If he was really a serial killer I’d catch him, right? I’m the kind of guy who can just look into someone’s eyes and see the darkness there.”

Matthew smiles back but he’s looking at Will like he can’t believe Will can see him. Like he knows that Will knows what Matthew is. And if he knows what Matthew is, Matthew will believe Will knows what Hannibal is.

Maybe Matthew will do nothing with the information. Maybe he’ll try to be Hannibal’s acolyte instead of Will’s. Maybe try to kill Hannibal. Maybe he’ll kill someone else for Will again, and that death will be Will’s fault.

All Will can do is wind him up, and watch him go.

Chapter 5

Something Will is curious about after his conversation with Matthew Brown is Abel Gideon. It is well past the time he would have escaped in Will's previous life—past the time he would have sat in Hannibal's dining room and watched Will have a 'minor seizure'.

After some cursory investigation, he finds out that Gideon has the exact history as the person he remembers, but had simply not attempted to escape. He had not dissected Dr. Chilton, and he hadn't killed his psychiatrists. He had gone forward with his lawsuit against Chilton, but nothing else was the same.

This is unaccountably devastating to Will's sense of…everything. Nothing makes sense anymore. His plans lay in ruins. He finds himself unable to function and stays home from work.

Hannibal shows up in the afternoon with a chessboard and some chicken soup, but Will is in no condition to play a game. He's not entirely sure Hannibal is there at all. Hannibal bundles Will up in blankets and feeds him soup as tears trail silently down Will's cheeks.

"What has happened, Will? You can tell me," Hannibal says. "I'm not your doctor but I'm your friend, and I care about your state of mind."

"If time isn't constant, if events aren't fixed, then can we be certain of anything?" Will asks desperately.

Of course, anyone but Hannibal would have had to take a moment with that. But Hannibal replies, "If time is not constant, then anything could happen, at any time. It's a rather comforting thought, if it were true."

"I know you think the teacup can gather itself up and time can reverse, but what does that mean in a practical sense? What if the teacup gathers itself up and you can't let go of the shattered pieces? What if your trauma is who you are and you cling to it like a lifeline? Does your flesh get stuck between the broken pieces? Do you go mad with the conflicting realities you can feel but you never lived?"

Hannibal goes very still, and Will realizes that he and Hannibal haven't talked about the teacup yet. Will looks up through his lashes, waiting to see what Hannibal will do. Will he recognize the idea as his own, or will he think Will is mad?

"Have your skills become so honed you're mindreading now? I've never said those words aloud to anyone."

Will smiles grimly. "Mindreader. Time traveler. I know how it ends, only I don't, because Abel Gideon didn't escape from jail. And nothing I did to change things would have changed that."

"What else do you know?" Hannibal asks, his voice deep as gravel.

“Nothing. I know nothing, but I feel…everything,” Will says.

“You know enough about me to keep your distance, but you still want to be near me. You lean in when I touch you, mirror my movements when we converse. You don’t dislike me the way you dislike Alana, suddenly, out of the blue, but you don’t trust me.”

“Are you here? Are we talking to each other? Is this my world, or is it a new one? Am I still asleep? How do you know if you’re awake?”

“You should come back to therapy. You seem like you need it.”

Will huffs in laughter. “Honestly, therapy, at a time like this?”

“Many people are in therapy because of an existential crisis. That seems to be what you’re experiencing.”

“Go home, Hannibal. And if you tell Jack or Alana any of this I’ll cut off your arm and feed it to you.”

“I’m sure I’d taste delicious,” Hannibal says. He leaves. Will remains unsure of whether or not he was there at all.

He rallies. Maybe he’s not the only time traveler. Maybe Abel Gideon got sent back, too, and he was allowed to change what he wanted. Maybe all of Lecter’s victims would get a second chance to beat the devil.

Or join him.

Will isn’t clear on where he stands on the beating or joining issue, but he stays the course on his goal to keep Lecter’s focus on him.

Jack is nominated for some civic award, and Bedelia thinks this would be the perfect place to debut their new relationship. He has to submit to her buying him a new suit and shoes, but he can see why she insisted when he sees them in the mirror on the way into the venue, the Willard Intercontinental. They walk past a mirror, and they look good together, although not as perfect as she said she and Hannibal looked together in Italy in her book. The idealized female and male forms, hiding a horrifying secret.

Bedelia wants his arm around her waist. She has a clear vision for the aesthetics they should present, and though Will has a different vision, he concedes to her wishes because this scheme of theirs will probably get her killed. If he lets her intricately plan her own defiance maybe his guilt for whatever happens won’t be as bad. Besides, waiting for Hannibal to give Bedelia a friendly greeting and then coming up behind her and kissing her neck is a bit obvious and tasteless, as much as Will wishes Bedelia was on board.

A part of Will wants Hannibal to know he’s doing these things on purpose; he wants Hannibal to see his actions and know his goals. But he has to be secretive or everyone will know what he’s become. And Jack and Alana felt responsible for what he became in his coma dream so they bent over backward to protect him even when he was wrong, but he wasn’t

sure they'd feel the same responsibility this time. Well, Alana wouldn't. He'd burned that bridge for sure, and she'd saved his life enough times that he felt a little silly for doing it.

She's attending tonight, and he dearly hopes Hannibal seeing Will with Bedelia won't make Hannibal sleep with Alana in retaliation. Will would like to save her from that fate this time, although who knew? Maybe dating Hannibal Lecter had soured her on dating men at all and pushed her into Margot's arms and her happy ending. Maybe it had been the best thing for her, and keeping her from experiencing that moment of horrifying revelation would ruin her life. Hannibal knew Will didn't care who Alana slept with anymore, so them sleeping together likely wouldn't happen for that reason. But Alana had been a little in love with Will before he was so cruel to her, and that could send her into Hannibal's arms. Hannibal genuinely liked Alana, but Will thought he'd keep her in reserve until he needed an alibi.

When Will and Bedelia walk into the sumptuous ballroom, eyes actually turn towards them and voices hush. It's Bedelia, of course, not the fact she's with Will. She's wearing a ball gown that somehow screams money and luxury while still being tasteful and subtle. She looks classy and sexy and suddenly Will is the envy of half the room.

Jack, his wife, and Hannibal, all walk over to greet them.

"This is new," Hannibal says. His voice is curt, almost rude, and Will feels incandescent with satisfaction. Though no hurt or anger shows on his face, Hannibal is absolutely livid.

"Oh yeah, you and Bedelia know each other, don't you? I'd forgotten," Will says airily.

"How you do know Hannibal?" Jack asks.

"We were colleagues when I was a practicing psychiatrist," Bedelia says in those measured tones.

Jack's eyebrows shoot up. "Will dating a psychiatrist? I never thought I'd see the day."

"Retired psychiatrist. And if she writes a paper on me I'll forgive her because she probably needed to do it in order to put up with me," Will says. They all laugh, as Will had intended them to.

Will sees Beverly and wants to go over and say hi, but he doesn't want Hannibal to see her and Will getting along in his current state of mind. Besides he has a date to look after. "Can I get you a drink?" he asks Bedelia.

"Champagne is fine," she says, and he snags two glasses off a passing waiter's tray and comes back to the group.

Will turns to Jack. "Will you be giving a speech tonight?"

Jack smiles. "No time has been allotted for that. So I get all the glory and none of the pain, tonight. I feel like I should be sharing this award with you, Will. Our closure rate has gone way up since you joined us. If I could give a speech, I would thank you and the team for all your hard work."

Someone comes up and distracts most of the group, and Hannibal comes close enough to say some private words to Will. “Strange to see two of the people closest to me have found each other. Can I ask how you met?”

“Happenstance,” Will says. “We met in a bar.”

Hannibal must know about Bedelia’s habit of going to seedy bars dressed like minor nobility because he just nods. “Bedelia wouldn’t have mentioned it to you, but she’s my psychiatrist. It’s somewhat alarming to see my former patient and my psychiatrist together. I wonder what you talk about.”

Will takes a drink of champagne. “Don’t worry, Hannibal. We never talk about you,” he says, just to twist the knife. Hannibal would definitely prefer them talking about him constantly. Will smiles. “But we do talk. I’ve never talked so much with anyone. The conversation makes being dragged to events like this worthwhile.”

Hannibal blinks. “I would have thought you would have dragged her. This being a work event for you.”

“Well, yeah, but if I hadn’t mentioned it to Bedelia she never would have decided we should go and I never would have come at all. Obviously,” Will says.

Hannibal nods. “I suppose that makes sense.” He pauses, and the fact that he’s flummoxed is perfectly understandable to Will. Will implying that they’re a big enough deal that Bedelia would worry about his career has to be devastating. If not to his feelings, then to his sense that he has control over what Bedelia and Will do. Of course, his unpredictability had seemed to make Hannibal fonder of him; perhaps this would make him fonder of Bedelia, which was not the goal. “You talk together?” he says, sounding as plaintive as a child denied a sweet.

“For hours,” Will says.

Hannibal looks as disgusted as if Will had been talking about fucking in the most obscene terms possible, and Will feels as effervescent as the champagne.

Bedelia comes over and takes Will’s arm, and looks up at him with adoration. Will always knew she was a good actor but hell. That’s something to see.

Hannibal gives that fake little smile he favors when he’s hiding something and says, “Bedelia, I wonder if I could borrow you for a private word.”

She nods and they go off together.

Jack comes over. “Wow, Will. That’s an impressive date you have there.”

“She’s…incredible,” Will says, smiling. “I can’t believe she’s with me.”

“When they bowl you over, that’s when you should keep them around. I think she’ll be good for you. She’s a little older than you, though, isn’t she?”

Will shrugs. “Yeah, but have you seen her?”

“I concede the point,” Jack says, holding up his glass.

They come back and everyone has to sit down for the presentation. They have dinner and listen to people say nice things about Jack and the other people being honored, and then they all leave.

In the car on the ride home, Bedelia gives Will a measured look. “What exactly did you say to Hannibal to make him so jealous?”

“I said you and I talked for hours. But never about him,” Will says, the corners of his mouth turning up slightly.

“You seem quite pleased with yourself,” she says.

“The goal was to provoke. We met our goal. What did Hannibal say to you?”

“He said he felt uncomfortable sharing his thoughts about you with me now that we’re dating, and that after tonight he had a lot of thoughts. He sounded hurt and betrayed…and lost.”

“Don’t tell me you feel bad,” Will says scornfully.

“I don’t feel bad. I feel like I was not fully prepared for how dangerous this endeavor was.”

“And how does that make you feel, doctor?”

She lets out a long breath. “Alive.”

“You want to keep it up?”

“Hannibal told me he wants to take a break from therapy. It’s what I’ve wanted for so long, and yet…”

“You want it. It scares you but you want that adrenaline rush. His focus is painful like the prick of intravenous drugs and just as addictive.”

“I’m worried about what I’ll do to regain his focus,” she says.

“Continuing to see me in places where Hannibal will see us will keep his focus on you. Or you could take the opportunity to wean yourself off of it.”

“I think I’ll leave town for a bit. If Hannibal lashes out because of his hurt feelings, you’ll be the only target available to take the hit. But I don’t think you’re averse to that.”

Will agrees. The date was a stroke of genius, but parading around a fake girlfriend to bug his frenemy is so seventh grade—and unless Will and Bedelia start to spend a lot of time together, the ruse won’t stand up to scrutiny. Will would do a lot to provoke Hannibal, but hanging out with Bedelia is a step too far, and he thinks she feels the same way about spending time with him.

Chapter 6

Hannibal makes a point of courting Will's friendship. He brings him food, is considerate of his space and health and invites him over for dinner or chess frequently, although Will refuses every time. He's not sure how long he can keep it up. He misses Hannibal, which is sort of humiliating to admit, and more than that, he doesn't want Hannibal to forget about him. One week Will realizes that Hannibal hasn't brought Will anything to eat and made no overtures of friendship a few days in a row, and Will is tempted to invite himself over right away.

He can't, though. Not yet. He knows Hannibal can lure him easily. Without even trying. But he's pretty sure Hannibal doesn't know it yet, and he doesn't want Hannibal to know. He sets an alert on his phone that he'll text Hannibal and ask if he wants to play chess in four days, and he tries to put the issue out of his mind.

He's been thinking about Alana, and the next time she's in the office he pulls her aside to apologize. He doesn't feel bad, but he ought to.

Alana follows him into his classroom readily enough but she seems apprehensive. "What can I do for you, Will?"

"I want to apologize. You didn't deserve any of that stuff I said to you before. You weren't my doctor, and your responses to my health, as much as some of them bothered me in retrospect, were all due to your concern for me. I know that now. I knew it then, but…I was pretty raw about everything and it made me lash out. I'm sorry I took it out on you."

She smiles. "I kind of figured it was something like that. But I gotta say, Will, it wasn't your anger at me over the misunderstanding about your health that really bothered me."

"What was it?" Will asks.

"You had feelings for me. I know you did. And I had feelings for you. I let myself believe, you know, when you were in the coma, that if you came out of it things would be different. You wouldn't be so fragile and we could explore our feelings together. Maybe even have something permanent, not just an affair. But it's like you woke up and hated me, instead."

"I don't hate you, Alana."

"You can be very prickly when you're not half in love with a girl anymore, though. I guess your attraction to me kept you from showing that side of yourself to me," Alana says. It's flirty and sweet and Will laughs.

"I've been told I'm abrasive."

Alana smiles and nods. "Yeah. I've felt the abrasion. But I've had some time to think about the things you said, and you're right. I was always poking my nose in about your mental health with you, and with Jack, but I refused to actually be your doctor and I didn't actually do anything to help you when you had a life-threatening illness. I'm not usually tentative, but

I've been tentative—reluctant—with you. Reluctant to treat you and reluctant to date you. I tipped my toes in the water and then pulled them out and pretended I didn't want to go swimming. I think that sent a lot of mixed messages—not just you, but to Jack, too, and even within my own thought process. If I accept your apology, I feel compelled to offer up my own."

Will grimaces a smile. "Wow, that's a really generous thing to say. Now I feel even worse about being a dick to you."

Alana laughs and they walk back to the lab together.

Four days later Will doesn't need to text Hannibal because they're working a case in Minneapolis. Hannibal drives the rental car from the hotel to the crime scene, and since Will is the only passenger he sees an opportunity to talk.

"I was thinking the other day about your desire to start playing chess. Maybe when we get back we should start doing that. Make it a regular thing," Will says.

Hannibal lights up. "I'd like that. And perhaps one of these days you'll allow me to cook for you."

"You bring me food all the time. Don't you get sick of feeding me?"

"It's been a pleasure to see your health improve since your coma. You look wonderfully healthy, and I believe you might even sleep at night," Hannibal says.

Will laughs. "It has been known to happen. I still have nightmares, but I don't sweat through the blankets that much anymore."

"Can I ask what brought about this change in attitude? You've refused all overtures of friendship for weeks."

Will shrugs. "I got caught up on all the work I missed when I was out sick and now that my thing with Bedelia is over I have more time on my hands. I had a talk with Alana the other day, too, to apologize for how I treated her. Realized I might need to let go of some of my bitterness over how things went down. I mean, no one's perfect. You just seem so perfectly capable and competent. It was really hard for me to acknowledge for a long time that you weren't willfully negligent."

Yeah, he's twisting the knife again. If Hannibal can't acknowledge that he misdiagnosed Will on purpose he'll be forced to admit he made a mistake.

"I think it was unconscious bias. I saw the terrible things you looked at every day, and I assumed that they would have to harm you. Seeing the things you see and thinking the thoughts you think would harm anyone, but especially someone as sensitive as you," Hannibal says.

Will throws his head back against the headrest. "Sensitive? Don't tell me you think I'm fine China, now. When you called me a mongoose it was the first time I thought you might

actually be able to understand me."

"I meant sensitive to stimulation, like a finely tuned seismic instrument, not sensitive as in emotional. Affecting fragility and shyness has served you well. It's made your colleagues and friends quite protective of you despite the darkness they know you're capable of. But it has never fooled me."

"I wasn't affecting fragility when I was sick."

"And you must have felt like the boy who cried wolf, telling people—telling me—that how you felt was more than just your sweet little act or your body's response to empathy overload and having me tell you that was exactly what it was."

"Sweet little act? Have you been talking to Freddie Lounds? Has she been calling me a psychopath more persuasively than usual?"

"I always suspected that you didn't need to hide behind your glasses and your lack of confidence was something you…cultivated for effect. But you stopped. After you woke from the coma."

"Are you sure it's not brain damage? What I had, and I honestly refuse to say the word aloud because god I'm sick of it, but it can cause personality changes. I've got brain damage. You so sure my condition going untreated for so long didn't just make me into someone else?"

"You're anything but damaged, Will," Hannibal says.

Will is pleased and alarmed by the reverence in Hannibal's voice. He's managed to be impressive enough to Hannibal that he feels that again, anyway. Hannibal had felt that same reverence before trying to slice into Will's skull, so it wouldn't necessarily protect him, but it might protect him from being just another Randall Tier.

When they get back from the case, Will goes home and feels the latest killer in his head like a toothache. Seeing Hannibal will either exacerbate the problem or exorcise it, and so he texts him to see if he's available for chess.

Will hadn't spent too much time in Hannibal's home at this point in the timeline he was currently living in. He couldn't remember if he'd done much more than peak his head into the kitchen and give Hannibal a bottle of wine. He tried to cover how intimately he knew the space now, but he didn't try that hard. Part of him wanted Hannibal to know the truth so he could confess it all. Hannibal would believe him, probably, and he'd have someone to talk to about everything. But it was dangerous, too, so he didn't want to come out and say it.

Hannibal gets them both drinks and sets up the chessboard at a table that seemed to have been added to the room for the express purpose of chess. It was utilitarian but well-lit and probably an antique. The chess set was beautiful; the black pieces ebony but the white either ivory or bone. Knowing Hannibal it might be either.

"I know it's been a long time since you asked me to play with you. I feel bad about you letting this setup go to waste. Have you been honing your skills with all your dinner guests

since then?" Will asks. He laughs slightly. "Should I worry about your skills? I can hardly remember how to play."

"I haven't played with anyone. I've been waiting for you," Hannibal says.

They play chess. Will is so vague on the rules he needs to be reminded at times how the pieces move, and Hannibal seems to be playing without having read any strategy books. If he's making famous plays he doesn't say anything about it, at any rate. Will realizes about halfway through the second game that Hannibal wanted to play chess so he has an excuse to look at Will a lot, and his whole body feels hot with pleasure. He wishes it was embarrassment, but it is pleasure. Maybe even arousal, if he wants to be completely, deadly honest about it.

He worries Hannibal will smell it on him. But maybe it'll further his goals. Keep Hannibal confused, if nothing else.

Hannibal tries to get Will to stay for food, but he refuses, and Will leaves. On the way out he sees Matthew Brown leaning against a building across the road, shivering in the cold. He wants to go over and ask him what he's doing, but in Hannibal's neighborhood everyone probably has security cameras and doorbell cameras, so he gets in his car and circles the block, not sure what Matthew is doing.

When he comes back, Matthew is gone.

Will drives home. He wonders if Matthew is stalking Hannibal or him. He certainly wasn't on that particular street by accident. Will he do something to Hannibal? Was he waiting for Will to leave so he could talk to Hannibal about Will's accusations? That seemed unlikely, because why would he let Will see him? Will tries to put all questions of Matthew Brown out of his head, but he's agitated about it for the rest of the night.

Hannibal did crowd the other killer out of Will's head while they were in the same room, but he wakes up panting and screaming thinking about the recent killings anyway that night.

After the fuss he'd made about it, he wonders if he could see Hannibal as a therapist now. It probably wouldn't help him in the way he wanted to be helped. If he hadn't fake dated her and made her leave town, he could see Bedelia again. If he hadn't kissed Alana, he could have asked her. How was it that most of the people he knew were psychiatrists but the only one he could still see was Chilton?

Maybe Abel Gideon would consider changing his focus from medicine to psychiatry.

Will's phone rings early in the morning. It's Jack.

"Will, we need you to come in. Someone attacked Hannibal Lecter in his home last night, and he's saying…well, we need you to come in and clear up some things."

"Is Hannibal okay?" Will asks.

"He's in the hospital."

Will stays silent. He knows what Jack is doing. He's not telling Will if Hannibal is okay to see how he'll act. They suspect Will. Either Matthew Brown told Hannibal something about Will before Hannibal killed him, or he survived and is talking now to Jack.

Will could play dumb with the best of them. "Was it a robbery? Home invasion?"

"Come in, Will. To my office. I need talk to you face to face."

He wants to see Will face to face, to see if he's lying. There must be something incriminating. If it was Hannibal's word against Will's, he knew who everyone would believe. He no longer had any illusions about that. And he wouldn't even need to cough up an ear for them to deny him like Peter denied Christ. Despite his vulnerable act—the one Hannibal had seen through so early on in their friendship—Will unsettled people. When they heard he'd done something terrible, it felt like a confirmation of something they already knew.

He'd been able to pull off vulnerable but somehow he'd never got the knack of harmless. Maybe he should ask Hannibal for tips.

A restless excitement pumped through Will's body. The game was on. It had worked. Matthew Brown had come for Hannibal.

It was Hannibal's move now.

Chapter 7

Will drives slowly. If he's going to be accused of attempted murder, he's not going to rush to be accused of attempted murder. He might be channeling Hannibal a little bit, but he's actually filled with internal glee that everyone is playing his game. He's not just being swept along by Hannibal's tide.

The cannibal jokes always got him. Hannibal had been so brazen—to visit a crime scene with the FBI where the corpse was missing a kidney and then serve Jack kidney pie and joke about feeding him people—but Will kind of gets it now.

Will's been singled out for being too smart, too sensitive, and too difficult, for his whole life. He's become apologetic about it. Sorry you tried to lie about why you stood me up and I practically read your mind. Sorry I think circles around you. Sorry I overthink things so much we have to break up. If he had to be so smart, it was kind of nice to be able to get some joy out of it.

Although his joy is premature. He still has to get out of this. And Will has a moment of deeper understanding of Hannibal in this, too. Hannibal is so smart that his disguise is perfect, and the game gets too easy. He needs to make it more challenging. He gets himself into situations where he has to prove his intelligence, his toughness and violent nature, and he feels alive.

Will arrives at work and walks slowly to Jack's office, and an agent he doesn't know pulls him into an interrogation room when he gets there. If he hadn't already been wrongfully accused by Jack in a previous timeline, the sense of betrayal might throw him off enough to tell the truth in his interrogation. Then he'd really sound crazy.

Jack and Alana sit in the interrogation room on one side of the table, leaving the chair on the other side open for Will. Sucks that Alana's in the room but Jack probably needs a second opinion on his weird brain. Will glances at the two-way mirror. If Hannibal isn't too hurt, he's probably watching.

Jack does some cursory greetings, but he's not pretending this isn't an interrogation. He launches in with, "At approximately eleven last night a man named Matthew Brown broke into Hannibal's home. Do you know this individual?"

Will has to be careful. Hannibal knows that Will doesn't really forget names and faces, and Jack is brilliant enough that he's probably figured that out as well. And there might be video of him and Matthew talking together for all he knew, so he can't lie completely. It would make him look less guilty to forget the name and remember the face once they show him the picture, but it's unrealistic.

Will frowns. "I think I played darts with him one time. Is he kind of, like, lanky, good-looking but somehow repellant? Dark hair?"

"You just met him once to play darts? Did you talk to him?"

“Yeah, a bit. He said he worked at the psychiatric facility where Abel Gideon is, and I told him I’d been there. He asked me about catching killers, and I said it wasn’t really something you talk about casually. He accepted that answer and we talked a little more, then we went our separate ways.”

Jack leans forward. “You never told him about Hannibal?”

Will creases his forehead. “Like told him he had a nice house or something? Why would I talk about which of my friends would be the best one to rob?”

Jack glances at Alana. Her expression doesn’t change, but she takes over. “Will, Hannibal wasn’t robbed. Matthew Brown tried to kill him.”

Will takes off his glasses. “Is he okay?”

Jack answers. “Matthew Brown strung him up like he was on a cross, and cut his wrists and tried to cut his Achilles's tendons. Luckily he cut a little high because if he had it would have meant surgery and long recovery time. Hannibal needed a blood transfusion, Will.”

Brown wasn’t as confident this time, because Hannibal was his first attempt to kill someone. He’d tried to cut his Achilles tendons because he was scared of Hannibal retaliating. As well he should be. Imagine wanting to kill someone and choosing Hannibal Lecter as your first attempt? “How did Hannibal get away? Did someone save him?”

“He managed to get free and bludgeon his attacker with the board stuck to his arms. Brown died before help could arrive,” Alana says.

Will frowns. “Huh,” he says.

Alana blinks rapidly. “What?”

Will shrugs. “Just…he’s a doctor. I’m surprised he wasn’t able to save this guy.”

Alana crosses her arms. “He tried, but he was tied up. By the time help arrived, Matthew Brown was dead.”

Will narrows his eyes. “I don’t get it. I’m glad to hear about what happened to Hannibal and that he’s going to be okay, but why am I being questioned? What does this have to do with me?”

Jack flips through his notebook. “Hannibal said that when Matthew Brown had him strung up, he told him some things. He said, and I quote, ‘your work friend Will Graham thinks you’re a psycho. He told me you’re the Chesapeake Ripper.’”

“Wait, you actually believe that I played darts with a random person one time, told him Lecter was a serial killer, and he went off and tried to kill him?” Will laughs incredulously. “Jack, that makes no sense. Even if I thought Hannibal was the Ripper, how would I know this particular stranger in a bar would be crazy enough to go after him and try to kill him? And why would this guy from the bar I don’t know believe me? This is actually insane.”

“Some would argue you have the profiling skills to do it,” Jack says.

Will leans forward. “Some would argue? Jack, you know what I do. I’m not a magician. I interpret evidence. I can’t just look at someone and know they’re a murderer. This makes no sense.”

Jack nods. “It’s not making a whole lot of sense, to be sure. But we have to follow up.”

“Do you have to follow up on the accusation that Hannibal’s the Ripper? I mean, presumably if you buy Brown’s versions of events he didn’t just take my word for it. He had to have some reason to think this imaginary version of me had a point.” Will imagined Matthew had followed Hannibal and seen him doing something suspicious. Will looks between Jack and Alana. “No?”

“No!” Alana shouts. “Hannibal is the victim here, not a serial killer.”

“No, I know. But you gotta give the guy credit. Hannibal’s a good suspect, when you think about it. He’s got the surgical skills, and he’s all artsy, plus he’s got that thing about cooking organ meat all the time. Which, if you’re a cannibal taking organs makes sense. You don’t have to bleed the meat or really butcher properly to take organs. Proper butchering would require a lot of time and space—you have to bleed the body, like Hobbs did—and there are all kinds of symbolic meanings to go with each organ. You know how tiresome serial killers can get with symbolism.”

Alana opens her mouth to shout again, but Jack holds up a hand. “Are you saying you think Hannibal is the Chesapeake Ripper?”

Will grins. “No of course not. But I can see why this Brown kid might have thought so. If you were just looking at him on paper he might seem like the Ripper. Hannibal seems pretty harmless when you actually know him—although I guess to be fair he’s killed two men since I met him, so he can’t be that harmless.”

“Will, forget about Hannibal for a minute. Did you tell this kid anything like what you just said about Hannibal? Make a joke about him having surgical skills or eating organ meat? Did you talk about him at all?” Jack asks.

Will shrugs. “No, but he did say he knew all about me from reading TattleCrime.com. Hannibal and I have appeared in articles together and separately in TattleCrime.com. If he was an avid reader, he probably looked at the profile Freddie ran of Hannibal and drew his own conclusions. You know, acted like an armchair detective. He worked in a psychiatric facility for the criminally insane—he probably thought that gave him insight into killers. Maybe he even constructed a fantasy where I sought him out and told him that he needed to protect society from the Ripper, and when we met in real life it seemed to confirm that fantasy. Does he have a history of mental illness?”

Jack leans back in his chair. “We’re working on finding that out. It seems unlikely that he would be employed at a mental hospital if he had a history of mental illness.”

“Is Matthew Brown his real name? Maybe he changed it. If he grew up in mental hospitals it might be easy to pretend to be qualified to work in one.”

Jack loses much of the tension around his shoulders. He’s buying this hook line and sinker. “We’ll look into that. I’m sorry for dragging you in in the middle of the night.”

“Hey, anything to help. Hannibal is one of ours,” Will says.

They ask a few more questions and then Will is released. He’s certain Hannibal will take the accusation Matthew Brown made against him a lot more seriously than Jack and Alana did—honestly, he’s kind of surprised that Hannibal even told them. Unless telling them was his way of telling Will that he knew what Will had done.

Now he had to wait and see how Hannibal retaliates.

“Will,” Hannibal says, emerging from behind a corner like mist.

Will puts a hand to his chest. “Jesus, Hannibal, you scared me. Are you okay? Alana made it sound like you were on death’s door. Even if you’re out of the hospital, shouldn’t you be home resting, or something?”

“I came in to give a statement. I hear that’s what you’ve been doing, too. Jack filled me in on how this man must have become fixated on us and constructed this idea that I’m a serial killer.”

Will shrugs. “I mean, it makes sense but there’s no real proof that’s what happened. Maybe he knew you from somewhere and saw me come out of your house last night and decided I was there because you’re a serial killer. I mean, I do hunt them for a living, right?”

Hannibal nods. “I suppose we might never know, although the team is investigating thoroughly. Perhaps he kept journals.”

“Maybe,” Will pauses, then says, “How are you getting home? You can’t drive like that, can you?” He gestures towards the bandages on Hannibal’s arms.

“I can’t go home, I’m afraid. It’s still a crime scene. Alana has generously offered to drive me to my office, where I’ll be staying until I’m allowed back into my home. I have to wait until she’s finished something, though.”

“I can take you, if you’re not too scared I’m going around telling people to kill you.”

“I would appreciate that,” Hannibal says. He takes out his phone and fumbles with it, and then hands it to Will. “Text Alana and let her know you’re taking me, will you? It hurts too much to text.”

Will takes his phone and texts Alana. Hannibal’s wrists are likely sore but he can’t believe that Hannibal giving him his unlocked phone isn’t some kind of test or trap. Maybe he’s going to lift Will’s fingerprints off it, but surely he’d have enough of Will’s fingerprints from his home or office if he really needed them. He hands the phone back to Hannibal. “Are you sure you’ll be comfortable in your office? You can stay with me, if you want.”

“There’s a small kitchenette and a cot in a backroom. I stayed there before I found my home. It won’t be a problem.”

“Hannibal Lecter, with only a kitchenette? That sounds like a tragedy in the making. I don’t know if you realize this, but I do have a spare room upstairs. It’s actually the master and I have quite a comfortable bed up there, but I like sleeping downstairs on the pull-out sofa surrounded by my dogs. I just feel safer. You’re welcome to stay with me if you’d rather.” Will doesn’t actually know what he’s doing here, but he’s doing it.

Hannibal seems as confused about Will’s motives as Will is. “Are you sure? I just heard you say I was practically a serial killer.”

Will grins. “I thought you might be watching. What can I say? Even serial killers need more than a kitchenette.”

“Especially the cannibals,” Hannibal says. His eyes are actually dancing, and Will is entranced. Hannibal looks up and down the hallway and sighs. “I wish I could accept, but I already declined the same offer from Jack and from Alana. It would be rude to accept yours after having declined theirs.”

“Come on, Hannibal, being a little rude never killed anyone,” Will says. Would a wink be too much? It would be. Will doesn’t wink.

“Alas, one has to live by one’s principles.”

“Alright. Do you need me to pick up groceries or anything?”

“I have some things in my office fridge. Future lunches and such. I’ll let you know if I need any supplies. Or if I’m so bored being off work I need you to come entertain me with a game of chess.”

“Okay, sounds good. Come on, let’s get you in the car and off your feet. Your legs must be killing you.”

Part 2: Chapter 8

Will has been different since he woke up from his coma, and Hannibal is fascinated.

Hannibal is making sausage for a dinner he's having with Alana and Jack. He cuts up a variety of organs. A sheep, this time, not a pig. He was able to move back into his home almost immediately, which seems to indicate the police are not investigating him for any wrongdoing. He planned a dinner to see how Alana and Jack feel about him after Will planted the seed that he could be the Chesapeake Ripper in their minds. If they test any food, they'll find it as clean and wholesome as any livestock. But he's distracted by thoughts of his favorite criminal profiler.

Hannibal has been fascinated with Will Graham since they met. Bedelia would say he had been obsessed, but then, who was she to judge? She'd dated Will herself.

Hannibal allows rage to swallow up reasonable thought for a moment, and then it clears. There will be a reckoning with Bedelia. Oh yes. Will claims he didn't know Bedelia was Hannibal's psychiatrist, and unless he was following Hannibal it is a reasonable claim, but Bedelia knew exactly what she was doing when she took up with Will.

The rage returns at the thought of Bedelia touching Will. Which. Hannibal is not sure why that is. He is not sexually attracted to Will, or covetous of his body. It's not images of Bedelia and Will in flagrante delicto that have Hannibal writhing in anger, but rather the thought of her touching Will's arm as though he belongs to her.

Because, Hannibal used to believe that Will was his. His creature. Or well on the way to being so before he got hit by that car and all of Hannibal's plans were foiled. He felt the same way about Bedelia, but her acting against him didn't bother him the way Will doing whatever he pleased without talking to Hannibal about it first gnawed at him.

So what's so different about Will?

Everything Hannibal has read about psychopaths and those with antisocial personality disorder suggests that they are unable to form an attachment like love once they reach adulthood. They can sometimes feel love for parents and siblings, and later their children, if they have any, and if they did fall in love during their adolescence, that love is likely highly passionate and unchanging. Hannibal hypothesizes it's something to do with having excess hormones during puberty. Many psychopaths adore their first love their entire lives, regardless of reciprocity, because they never feel love again. He had thought his ill-advised passion for his aunt would be the only time he would feel love, but his feelings for Will Graham, though not immediately sexual, were becoming decidedly passionate.

But then again, Hannibal is virtually undiagnosable. He has many traits of this or that disorder, but never enough to really firmly state what he is. He is too intelligent, mainly, to fit in the molds of modern psychiatry. Hannibal had concluded that he was simply a monster—but one of legend, like the kind who was the child of gods. A minotaur, or the medusa. Perhaps if he was ever caught and studied, he would have the ability to be honest with his

psychiatrist and get further towards a diagnosis than he'd been able to get himself. He is aware it is difficult to self-diagnose a mental disorder, especially when one is a narcissist. But then he is likely a vastly superior psychiatrist than any who would have access to him in that situation.

Regardless of his feelings towards Will, Will's feelings towards him are a mystery. Hannibal isn't sure if Will fired him as a psychiatrist because he knew he was the Chesapeake Ripper, or if he had done so because he wanted to date Hannibal, or if he'd done it for any reason in between. Indeed, he isn't sure if Will is sure. He could have sworn he'd smelled arousal from Will at times, but only recently, and perhaps it wasn't about him. He'd never detected any signs of sexual interest from Will before. In fact, it had been quite an effort for him to make Will interested in him at all, at first.

What is a fact is that Will's coma had somehow put many clues together about Hannibal's interactions with Will and with the FBI as a whole together for Will, and he'd gained some insight. He knew something. In fact, he knew things that Hannibal had never told him, like that he was sometimes convinced time would reverse if he only wanted it enough.

He'd said in that miserable stupor Hannibal had found him in that he'd seen the future, and whatever he'd seen made him drawn to Hannibal but fearful of him, too.

And Hannibal is more intrigued than ever.

When Matthew Brown had snuck into his house, Hannibal had been sleeping. A strange smell had awoken him, and then he'd felt the prick of a needle. When he'd awoken the second time, he was in his bathroom. He was standing precariously on a bucket with his arms tied to a board, and the board was fastened somehow to the showerhead in the middle of the ceiling. Blood dripped down the drain from a cut on each of his wrists, and the pain was intense. There was a rope around his neck, and though he couldn't quite work out what was attached to what, he was certain if he stepped off the bucket, the design was that he would be strangled, smothered, or his neck would break. Hannibal was fairly sure the showerhead would not hold his weight, so he examined the boy who had put him in this elaborate contraption without much panic.

He was a good-looking kid wearing a tight t-shirt and jeans. He had a bag full of goodies in a black gym bag which Hannibal assumed he wanted to torture Hannibal with.

"Hello," Hannibal ventured, "I'm Hannibal Lecter. And you are?"

"My name's Matthew," he said. His look became crafty. "Are you sure Hannibal Lecter is what you go by? Because your work friend Will Graham thinks you're a psycho. He told me you're the Chesapeake Ripper."

Hannibal thought for a moment while all the odd little bits of Will's behavior quietly rearranged themselves and came into clearer focus. If Will believed—knew—that he was the Ripper, some of his behavior made sense. But why tell this boy and not Jack?

"Are you a monster killer?" Hannibal asked. Jack, if he even believed Will, would try to capture not kill, after all. Was Will's goal to kill Hannibal?

“I’ve never killed anyone before. But Will Graham looked at me and knew that I wanted to. He knew we were the same. He saw me, even though we only spoke together one time. He told me you were the Ripper so that I could kill you and gain your strength. Will Graham believes in me.”

The idea that Will had looked at this boy and seen him when it took far longer for Will to see Hannibal had made Hannibal unaccountably furious. He should have been happy that Will was fooled by his disguise, but somehow he was not. His rage made his tongue loose. “He saw you were easy to control.”

This made the boy angry, and he walked behind Hannibal. Hannibal couldn’t see what he was doing. He thought the boy would kick the bucket out from under his feet, but instead he made an inept attempt to cut his Achilles’ tendons. It would have been clever, had it worked, because Hannibal would have been unable to stand on his toes and, if the shower head held, he would have slowly died. But instead, he yanked on the board, then bent his knees so that his full weight was on the showerhead. As he had suspected, it broke apart before the trap had a chance to do what it was intended to do, knocking Hannibal to the ground.

Matthew tried to defend himself, but he’d given Hannibal a board and Hannibal got up quickly and angled his body to smack Matthew in the head with it. He knocked him out, and then reasoned that it would be easy to explain that he overdid his self-defense in a panic, and hit him again, then again. He saw brains, so he knew he could stop.

He managed to unlock his phone with his foot (his face was too bloody for facial recognition to unlock it) and use the emergency dialer to call for help, and had the police officers who answered the call help him contact Jack.

He was in the hospital by the time Jack showed up to question him. Of course he considered not mentioning the information that Will Graham had possibly orchestrated the attack, but what would the fun be in that? Will had obviously intended for Hannibal to know, so Hannibal told Jack and had Jack wait until he was well enough to observe before he questioned Will about it. The next morning Will came in, and he mentioned in interrogation that Hannibal was a perfect suspect for the Ripper crimes.

No one else seemed to notice how insightful the comment was, and Will laughed it off. It seemed that he was saying it not to be believed, but for his own purposes. But why? One possible reason was to make it clear that he knew—or believed—that Hannibal was a killer. Hannibal was tempted to believe this was at least partially Will’s goal. He’d seemed quite happy that Hannibal had heard his accusation; he was not guilty or upset at all. But if that was not his entire goal…

…was it possible he was playing the game?

Was he…had he…sent a killer after Hannibal to see what would happen? To see what he would do? To test him?

An almost erotic thrill of pleasure coursed through Hannibal’s body at the thought. He’d wanted things from Will for a very long time. His attention, his friendship, his darkness, his…compliance. His becoming. But to think he would accept his place by Hannibal’s side at

this juncture. To think that he would reach that level of elevation with only the minimal prompting Hannibal had already provided.

Well.

What a remarkable boy.

Hannibal knew Will had considered the fact that if he accused Hannibal of being a killer in an offhand, joking manner, no one would believe it. But if later Hannibal was found to be the killer, everyone would think back to that time when Will called him the perfect suspect. It was reassuring, in a way, like Will had said out loud that no matter what games they played, he was implicated. That if Hannibal went down, because of what he'd said today, Will might go down with him, or at least lose many things he valued.

Hannibal has an equal.

Hannibal thinks back to when Will invited him to stay at his place. Hannibal is strangely tempted to release bugs in his home and office or burn them down just to get another invitation, but he is almost concerned about what that would be like. Being so close to Will for several days in a row. It's almost enough to make his heart beat faster.

It was something to think about, but he did like many of his things. Perhaps Will would invite him again without such a dire motivator. He could pretend to fall down and be unable to care for himself. That way he would also be able to have Will do tender things, like change his bandages.

Something in Hannibal rebels against both the thought of pretending vulnerability and feebleness in order to gain Will's attention—would Will even like him anymore if he saw him as a feeble old man?—and his desire for Will's tenderness. But something about the picture of Will changing his bandages or cleaning his wounds is irresistible, and he imagines it again and again in his mind palace.

And in the meantime, he has to give his dear friend a little taste of reciprocity.

Chapter 9

Hannibal is eager to see Will again, but unfortunately, events conspire to keep them apart. He has the dinner for Alana and Jack, and they are tiresomely impressed by him and convinced by his person suit.

That night, Hannibal gets a phone call.

“Hannibal?” the voice is so small and frightened, Hannibal at first can hardly recognize it as Abigail.

“Is that you, Abigail?”

“Yes.”

“What can I do for you?” he asks.

She sounds more relaxed when she answers. “I left town with a friend. I was hoping you could be her doctor. Just the doctor on record. She’s got a strange condition and, well, people here are asking a bunch of questions. It would be so much easier if you could just sign some forms and send them back to us.”

“It would be unethical of me to treat someone I don’t know,” Hannibal says.

Abigail laughs. “Unethical. You’re hilarious. Anyway, you’re not treating her. Just saying you saw her like a month ago and gave her a diagnosis. It’s the right diagnosis so it’s not like you’ll get in trouble over that. No biggie.”

“Depending on the forms, that shouldn’t be a problem. What have you been up to? Why did you leave town?”

There’s a pause on the line. “Will told me to. He said Jack Crawford was getting suspicious. He bought me a used car and sent me on my way. I haven’t been charged with anything so it’s not like I wasn’t allowed to leave town.”

Hannibal imagines Will had also told her not to contact Hannibal. Abigail, as usual, did what she liked. “Are you doing alright? Do you need a fake ID? Money?”

“I mean…that would be great. Can I get a fake ID for me and my friend? And high school transcripts so we can get into college? Maybe a little money?”

“Where are you?”

“Toronto,” she says.

Hannibal gives her the name of a contact, and then says goodbye, and calls the contact and tells him to give Abigail whatever she likes, and charge him for it. He tells the man to inform him of the new name he gives Abigail. He also sends her money to the email she’d sent the

medical forms from, and then examines the forms. He suspects the person he was claiming to have treated is also the person who was the suspect in those murders who he had thought had Cotard's syndrome.

How had Will found her, diagnosed her with an extremely rare disorder, and sent her off with Abigail all before even looking at the case files?

Hannibal is grinning without even realizing it. Will is such a joy. He almost doesn't want to reply to the Matthew Brown incident in case Will is hurt beyond repair, but he has faith in Will. He remembers sending Will after Tobias Budge and that moment of terror when he thought Will was dead. It had been invigorating to realize his Will had survived. He'd felt so uncertain and then so proud and so alive in his relief, like Will's near-death had affected Hannibal's entire nervous system.

He had to do it. Will was worthy and capable and he might do anything in response and that was so exciting. He could wind up a smart, capable person like Miriam Lass—a person smart enough to catch him—and know within an acceptable margin of error exactly what she would do. He could do the same with people who had darker impulses, too. But Will.

Will is spectacular.

But Hannibal tempers his enthusiasm. Perhaps the situation is not what he thinks. Which only makes him more interested, frankly, but it should also make him cautious. Will has a sense of righteous justice that could mean whatever game he is planning is a game for Jack. Or with Jack. A less interesting specimen but definitely a worthy foe, despite his fawning over Hannibal's status and refinement. He really should spend more time with Jack to confirm that Jack is still blind—but he's impatient to begin laying the groundwork for his retaliation against Will.

He finds his candidate by looking through his old case files. A savage young man by the name of Randall Tier. Cursory surveillance confirms that his therapy helped young Randall find the man—or beast—he was meant to be, and Hannibal manages to set him on a collision course with Will before he's garnered the attention of the FBI.

And then he hears nothing. For the longest time. Will even comes to his house and plays chess, and says nothing. Not even one of those little ambiguous comments that are so excitingly disconcerting. Did Randall simply not attempt to kill the profiler after all?

An early morning phone call from Jack sends Hannibal to the natural history museum where Randall works, and Hannibal's body alights with anticipation. Something must have happened. And he has no idea what.

When he sees Randall Tier's body the way Will has arranged him—the way Will has thanked Randall for dying at his hand—he is astonished to feel not just pride at what he managed to draw out of Will, but reverence. Tenderness. Love. Jealousy that Will did this alone when he could have come to Hannibal. When he should have come to Hannibal. He sees the bandages on Will's hands and shudders with the need to touch him. He would have washed the blood from Will's knuckles so tenderly.

He had killed Randall with his hands. Ferocious boy.

He joins Will by the body—work of art—and glances at Will. “Are you alright? You have bandages on your hands.”

“Ice fishing. Just got a little frostbite. Nothing to worry about.”

Hannibal nods. Frostbite typically affects the tips of fingers, not the knuckles, but ice fishing is a boring enough subject that most people wouldn’t bother to question it.

“This is a desecration. The killer wanted to humiliate Randall Tier,” Hannibal ventures.

Jack nods, but Will shakes his head violently.

“No,” Will says, “It’s a commemoration. The person who killed him knew him. He had some reason for associating him with this beast. This display is to show us something about Tier—something that the killer shares, to a certain extent. Shares or at least understands.”

“An empathetic killer?” Jack asks.

“Don’t confuse empathy with understanding, Jack. This killer saw something in him that drew him. Made him jealous, even. Randall Tier was a killer, and his killer instinct came a lot more naturally to him than it did to this killer.”

“It’s a fledgling killer. He hasn’t killed before,” Hannibal says, “At least, not like this.”

Jack loses patience with the conversation. “So you’re saying if we look into Randall Tier, we’ll find that he’s killed? Could the person who killed him be a vigilante?”

Will frowns. “He wouldn’t think of himself that way. But he would need a good reason to kill someone,” Will laughs lightly and crosses his arms. “He wouldn’t just kill someone who stole his parking spot.”

That’s a dig. Will is making a dig at Hannibal for killing the rude. Hannibal would bet his life on it. Will knows so much more than he should. Had he known all along? Were their therapy sessions just ways for Will to find out more about Hannibal’s pathology? Perhaps Will was following him. It would explain a lot.

Except it didn’t explain why Will didn’t tell Jack everything.

Will having foreknowledge of what was to come explained more. His little god. Hannibal needs to find a way to show him how it feels to be seen and known. To revere him. To worship him. He needs to find a way to pay tribute to his god.

In blood, of course.

But while he plans his homage, the banal details of everyday life dare to interfere. He acquires a new client—a woman named Margot Verger. He’s concerned when Will mentions that he spoke to her, fearing she’ll involve Will in her fight with her brother, but it doesn’t appear to go anywhere.

Mason, the woman's despicable brother, tries to interfere with her therapy, but dies unexpectedly before Hannibal can do much more than mention to Margot that he thinks it would be therapeutic for her to kill him. He doesn't think his suggestion was successful, and a conversation with Will confirms his suspicions.

He broaches the subject of Mason Verger in the lab, knowing that Will is familiar with her sister.

"Tragic, for a man with such a bright future to be cut down in his prime," Hannibal says.

Surprisingly, Zeller pipes up. "There's been rumors about that guy for years. Not sure what specifically, but his father's been covering things up for him since he was young. One of those rich kids who probably killed his prom date."

"I wonder if the killer could be the same one who brought justice to Randall Tier," Hannibal says. He doesn't believe Will killed Mason Verger, but he wants to poke at Will by mentioning Randall Tier as often as possible.

Will raises his eyebrows. "What would make you say that?"

"A righteous sense of justice. Jack told me you did eventually connect Randall Tier to some murders. Perhaps in the killer's mind, they both deserved retribution."

Price shrugs at the idea, but Zeller shakes his head. "No way. There's like zero points of comparison between the murders. Tier was beaten to death, and Verger was gunned down coldly in a parking lot. Honestly, his death looks more like a hit than anything else."

Will smiles slightly. "I think you could be right about that, Zeller. If the man had a habit of making enemies, maybe he just crossed the wrong person."

Hannibal wouldn't have thought anything about it, but Will's eyes flicker to glance at Hannibal, and in that look, Hannibal knows. Will killed Mason. Not as a play for Hannibal's attention. It isn't part of the game. But he had wanted to be rid of the man and he'd taken him out.

Will is not just killing to show Hannibal who he is. He is killing for his own reasons, independent of Hannibal and his wishes.

His desire to show Will his love and pride deepens. He has to make it perfect. But to have a perfect tribute, he must first find the perfect victim.

No one who gained his enmity by minor rudeness would do. He must show Will the respect of killing someone that Will would approve of. He won't become a killer of killers for Will, but he can bend a little, to show Will respect. Reverence. Adoration.

He pours over his records to find an appropriate victim, and then Will calls him to play chess. He begs Will to let him cook dinner, but Will refuses.

It's so difficult to court someone when they refuse food. And it's definitely courting, now. Hannibal doesn't have any illusions about that anymore. He might not be able to literally

make love to Will, because the man is presumably caught up in some boring ideas of heterosexuality foisted on him by an unimaginative society, but he could seduce him into a state of permanence in Hannibal's life—whatever that looked like.

He would not be letting Will go.

When they play chess Hannibal stares his full at his darling. Will notices, but seems pleased. He doesn't flirt or show any reciprocity, but when he looks up from the board and sees Hannibal watching, he'll grant Hannibal a moment or two of eye contact. Hannibal feels like a courtier in a forbidden love affair, stealing looks from a shy boy—and he's never been happier.

After chess they both stand and Hannibal runs a hand down Will's wiry bicep and says, "Please, let me cook you a meal. If you're worried about my butcher, you can bring the meat." Given his strange knowledge, he has wondered if Will knows what Hannibal has been serving at his dinner parties.

"I'm more of a fisherman than a hunter, Hannibal. Maybe I'll bring you my latest catch one day soon," he shrugs, and smiles self-deprecatingly. "I thought you might be asking to be polite, all the other times. We see a lot of each other, between chess and work. I wouldn't want to outstay my welcome."

"If I spent every moment of my waking life with you, I would be jealous of the hours I was asleep," Hannibal says.

Will smiles gently. "You say the sweetest things to me."

"I'd be sweeter still, if I thought you'd let me." Hannibal knows he's pushing his luck, but that is what he does. He pushes. And Will allows his push, this time.

Will smiles enigmatically. "Make me dinner first. Maybe sometime next week?"

Hannibal nods and Will leaves, but next week is too far away. He needs his Will always. By his side. In his home. He needs him to have no one and nothing but Hannibal so that his focus is only on Hannibal.

Chapter 10

Life interferes. Again. Alana seems to need a lot of emotional support suddenly, and she constantly tries to make appointments to see Hannibal or to call him on thin pretexts to discuss clients. It's difficult to find a block of time to get done what he needs to do.

He realizes that she thinks she's fallen in love with him when she kisses him one night after they've made dinner together and are loitering in the kitchen waiting for the roast to cook. He wonders what Will would do to him if he started a relationship with Alana. It would definitely provoke him. Maybe even make Will jealous; make him realize that he wants Hannibal for himself. He considers continuing the kiss and letting it develop into a relationship, but he doesn't think he can handle the divided focus. To make a woman believe he was emotionally invested he had to put in a lot of effort because it didn't come naturally, and he wants to focus on Will. He's jealous enough of all the time and energy he spends on things other than Will already.

He pulls away. "I'm very sorry if I've given you the impression—"

She smiles contritely. "I don't think you did. Not really. I needed support, and you were too polite to tell me we weren't that intimate. Which made me think we were that intimate. I should have talked to you about changing our relationship before I went ahead and changed it in my head."

"We are very good friends, Alana, and I would love to continue to support you and spend time with you," Hannibal says. "If things were different, of course I would want to pursue something more with you. We've danced on the edge of taking our friendship further for years."

"What's different? I don't want to sound like I'm entitled to change our relationship at my whim, but we really did have an unspoken agreement that we would have an affair when either of us decided to move forward."

"Yes, at one time that was how we both felt. But just because I felt that way once doesn't mean that I'm obligated to follow through now," Hannibal says.

Alana colors. "I didn't mean that! Oh my god. I didn't mean that at all. You make me sound like a—like a sexual predator. But I guess what I'm trying to ask is, is there someone else?"

"Yes," Hannibal says.

"Can I ask about her?"

"I'm not ready to share anything. We don't have that kind of relationship, and it's unlikely that we ever will, so there's really nothing to tell. But he does have my entire heart," Hannibal says.

Her eyes widen, but she doesn't comment on the use of 'he'. Trying to seem cosmopolitan when she really isn't. She succeeds, sometimes, and she's actually very open-minded. She's a good psychiatrist, and good psychiatrists have to be open-minded. She sighs. "Well, I hope you find your way to each other."

"If you don't mind me asking, what has made you feel all this vulnerability?"

She rolls her eyes. "I know, I'm a mess. It's Will."

Hannibal's focus shifts to a butcher knife, just a stride away in the dry rack. "Will Graham?" he asks.

She chuckles. "Is there any other Will in our mutual acquaintance? I feel like he's all we talk about, sometimes. I don't know if you knew, but Will and I were dancing on the edge of our own affair, at one time."

"He told me he kissed you," Hannibal says. He takes a step closer to the knife.

"Yes, and I rejected him, even though I really didn't want to. But he seemed so fragile. If I'd only known he was sick, not mentally fragile. But I didn't, and then the coma happened, and Will's feelings about everything changed. Definitely his feelings about me."

"That must have hurt you," Hannibal says. He turns away from the knife and the tension around his shoulders eases.

"It doesn't bother me that much—I mean it does, but not in the way you're thinking. It's more that I realized something about myself. I hesitate. I usually think of it as a good thing. I'm thoughtful. I don't, you know, rush in. But this time it cost me the opportunity to explore my feelings for Will."

"So you decided that you ought to stop hesitating to explore your feelings for me," Hannibal says.

She laughs and shakes her head ruefully. "Not the best reason to kiss someone, probably. I'm sorry if I made you uncomfortable."

"Not at all."

Alana is, luckily, embarrassed enough by the encounter that she makes herself scarce for a while, and Hannibal takes advantage. He sketches and imagines and obsesses with the idea of what he'll do to the person he decides to kill and all the ways Will could respond.

The most likely response is disgust. Even if Will thinks he wants Hannibal to kill for him, he'll be shocked and disgusted at the reality of it, at least a little. If Hannibal makes it beautiful enough, perhaps he can lessen that response.

He also needs to find a person whose death Will would approve of, and he needs to make sure Will knows about the person's crimes before he sees the body so that he doesn't have any conflicting feelings, too. For a moment he considers Freddie Lounds, but as obnoxious as she is, she's extremely useful. And Hannibal has a kind of affection for her not unlike the

affection he has for Will. By all logic, she should be the epitome of what he hates—most of her personality is just rudeness compounded by more rudeness—but there's a savagery to it that appeals to Hannibal. And regardless of Hannibal's feelings, Will hating the woman does not mean he wants her dead.

Hannibal decides that the best way to meet all his goals is to kill a high-profile killer who has 'gotten away with it' according to the public. He doesn't have to go far afield to find one. There is a man only a state over who had gunned down a black teenager for 'acting suspicious' in his neighborhood, and had been acquitted. He's brazen in his defense of his actions on the conservative news channels which view him as a hero, he's so famous that his face is instantly recognizable, and Hannibal knows he must infuriate Will.

Hannibal finds a schedule online of the speaking engagements the man—Toby Montgomery—has lined up. It's easy enough to sneak into his house when he's away at one of them and scope out the situation. Despite his high profile, the man doesn't have a security system. When Hannibal sneaks around the house, he discovers why. Montgomery very much hopes there will be an intruder. He lives alone, and he's hidden weapons all around the house. Hannibal finds this slightly endearing, but it doesn't stop him from moving all the weapons around to places he wants them, and taking the bullets out of all the guns.

Montgomery comes home at midnight, and Hannibal waits upstairs. If he attacked the man downstairs, his neighbors might see, as he doesn't have window treatments in the downstairs windows. When Montgomery turns on the light in his spacious bedroom, Hannibal is sitting in the chair in the corner of his room. Montgomery doesn't see him right away, but when he does, he wastes precious moments going to the wrong place to find an unloaded gun.

Hannibal is on him before he gets far. He puts the man in a chokehold and cuts off his air until he passes out, and then for good measure sedates him. He wouldn't want Toby waking up as he drives him back to the abandoned warehouse he had prepped for this endeavor. If Toby had been in Baltimore, he would have taken him home, but this was better. A Baltimore celebrity would have been more potentially incriminating.

The transportation goes well, and he manages to get the unconscious man into the warehouse complex without any issues.

He straps the man to his operating table and looks at his body critically. He wants to have the man recognizable, so Will knows who he is, but also not glorify him by making his image live on in infamy after his death.

He's going to need another corpse to do it right. He had a plan b to use Montgomery and no one else if things went badly and he had to lay low—wouldn't want to grab the other victim with the police on high alert—but things went well. It helped quite a bit that Montgomery didn't have a security system. He decides to proceed to find the other victim and make his display perfect. Toby Montgomery isn't dead, so he'll keep. He heads out to find the judge who found Toby innocent. After all, the media had researched his decisions over the years and the consensus was the judge's death would be a net gain for society. Hannibal finds out the judge has a wife, so he kills him in his driveway just as he arrives home and stuffs in him the trunk of his car.

He takes the judge back to the warehouse and starts to work on him right away. He's inspired. He has a beautiful idea for a diorama of the judge as lady justice, not just blind but also brainless. He chuckles he works.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Toby shouts. Hannibal looks over to see the man straining against his bindings on the table.

"Oh, you're awake. I thought you should see the kind of thing that awaits you. When I kill you, I'm going to make you into art." The stress would flood the young man's body with endorphins and affect the taste of the meat, but Hannibal had developed a little bit of a fondness for the tangy taste of fear.

"What the fuck? Is this some kind of liberal degeneracy?"

"Degeneracy implies moral decay. I'm afraid my sense of morality is likely beyond your frame of reference, but quite fixed. I might do things you would consider terrible, but I'm not escalating in any material sense. But nothing you've done offends my sensibilities particularly. I think my dear friend might appreciate if you suffered and died. I'm keen to improve his opinion of me, you see," Hannibal says as he takes the judge's organs out of his body and puts them on a tray beside the stretcher.

"Oh my god. Who the hell are you? What kind of friend wants you to murder me and the judge who let me off? If this is some democratic act of war, some libtard fucking—"

Hannibal holds up a bloody rag. "I'm happy to converse with you if you'll keep from going on about politics. They don't interest me. If you can keep a civil tone, I won't stuff this into your mouth."

Montgomery gags and shakes his head. "Please don't do that. I'm an important person. People will know I'm missing. They'll look for me. I'm friends with a bunch of senators. I have so many media contacts. If you have a manifesto or something I could get that to the people really fast. I can promise you like two hours on Fox any day of the week."

Hannibal smiles slightly. "As I said, I have no particular interest in who you are or what you did. Prejudice is so petty and ugly. Small. Banal, really. And so very common. I think my dear Will might like to see you get justice. The darling boy delights in thinking justice is possible. Silly, I know, but I thought I might provide some small semblance of it for him."

"What are you, gay?" he huffs in disbelief and then laughs lightly. "After all the threats from the gun-hating libtards, it's a gay dude that's going to kill me in the end?"

"I really don't think of my sexuality as fixed. I'm European. I wasn't raised with those Puritan notions your country was founded on."

"That's disgusting. You think if I'd been raised in Europe I'd just be banging dudes left and right?"

"Perhaps. If you met the right one. The perfect one."

“If this guy’s really so great, he’ll see what you’re doing—the way you’re playing with dead bodies—and he’ll be disgusted. He’ll be scared. Anyone would be. You can’t just show people that. I had to. I had to pretend to be normal. I had to pretend I was scared of that kid to get away with hurting him like I wanted to.”

Hannibal puts down his knives and takes off the gloves and walks over. He pats Montgomery’s knee gently. “I know. I know that you wanted someone to break into your house. You set traps. You want to kill, but you’re too consumed with societal concepts of morality to do it without what people consider a just reason.”

Montgomery starts crying. “I just wanted to see how it felt. I knew I could get away with it. Do you know how long I waited for my chance? How long I dreamed of it?”

“You should have been a soldier or a police officer,” Hannibal says. “Even a nurse. It’s easy to hide in plain sight in those professions, or so I’m told. But don’t worry, even if you weren’t able to achieve your dreams of violence, your death will serve a higher purpose.”

Montgomery whimpers quietly.

Hannibal pats him again. “You’re going to be a valentine for my love, and that should make you very proud.” He turns back to the judge. He has work to do.

Chapter 11

Hannibal works all night, and then all the following day. He planned thoroughly, so something that should take weeks only takes slightly longer than twenty-four hours. He perfects his design as he waits for the clock to tick to the time he's allotted to be the safest to hang his art, and then in a flurry of romanticism that's probably related to how people like him eventually get caught, he decides to go and harvest some flowers from a local farm to add to his display.

After all, he can't buy flowers for Will and add them to a Ripper scene. That would be traceable. He uses a machete to inelegantly chop down rows of flowers and fills the backseat of the van he's using with them—the other parts of the van are already filled with bodies and the mechanisms he'll need to make everything hang properly.

It's a long night's work, and he probably won't be able to make it back to Baltimore by the time the body is discovered. Luckily, however, his scene is likely to create some shock and awe, and it will be nightfall or later before the Richmond authorities call on Jack to come and relieve them of their confusion.

He drives quickly but not so quickly he would be pulled over. When he arrives in Baltimore, he leaves his van in an abandoned warehouse where he vacuum packs the organs he took from the men he killed. He takes the bus to his office, then freezes the organs in a secret freezer in the basement below his office. Then he drives The Bentley home and lays down with cucumbers on his eyes. He doesn't intend to sleep, but after so many hours without rest, and hour of shuteye will make him look less weary. He showers, dresses for his first appointment of the day and is ready to talk to his client at eleven.

No one will have any reason to suspect that he went out of town. He wore a hat with LEDs on the brim when he was driving so no traffic camera will give a good picture of him, and of course he used a van the FBI knows nothing about that can't be connected to him. He bought nothing and spoke to no one during the trip. It went as close to perfect as such a trip ever had, and Hannibal thinks this means that the gods themselves approve of him and Will becoming closer. Or perhaps they're too afraid to meddle in things beyond their control.

Hannibal sees three more clients, goes home, and is prepping for dinner when Jack calls.

Without preamble, Jack says, "Hannibal, we need you in Richmond. It's the Ripper."

"Are you sure? What does Will say? Has he seen?"

"I know you think I'm obsessed, Hannibal, but this time I'm right. It's the Ripper. Will hasn't seen it yet—I want him to see the scene for the first time when he's in the room. But there's no one else who leaves scenes like this. No one. I'm right."

"Has Will ever seen a Ripper scene first hand?" Hannibal asks.

“No. Why do you think I’m calling you? I want you in the room with him when he sees it. In case—well, just in case.”

Hannibal would tell Jack that his idea that just because it’s a Ripper scene and those scare Jack Will might be more sucked in than he was for the average run-of-the-mill serial killer was absurd, but it serves Hannibal’s purpose so he says nothing of the kind. He puts away the food he had been chopping neatly and takes a few nice meals that will defrost quickly and puts them into a cooler for him and Will to eat later. And some for breakfast. Will might call him silly for it but he doesn’t want to eat road food.

Hannibal had declined a ride, so he takes his prepacked bag, his cooler, a few suits still in their dry-cleaning bags, and he’s back on the road, this time in his Bentley. Though he needs very little sleep he’s glad that managed to snatch a few hours of rest that morning. He wants to look his best for Will.

He might be slightly over-eager, because he reaches the courthouse before Will has arrived. That suits him. He takes a moment to freshen up in the washroom and straighten out his suit, and then Jack leads him into the courtroom to see the scene.

It looks impressive, even with the crowd of law enforcement milling around doing their jobs, and the bigger group of law enforcement trying to inconspicuously take pictures of the body on their cell phones and getting shouted at for it.

Suddenly, Jack’s voice rings out. “Everyone, clear the room. Hannibal, you can stay. Just stay out of Will’s way.”

If Hannibal was still Will’s psychiatrist, he would take issue with the pressure that Jack’s dependency on Will’s perception puts on Will—but it isn’t his job to raise concern anymore. And despite Will’s insistence that he didn’t like attention, Hannibal thinks he can probably work just fine with strangers in the room. He likes to be so important everyone else in the investigation has to leave. Who wouldn’t?

There’s some grumbling, but they must have been briefed to expect it, because they leave without complaint. And then the doors of the courtroom open, and Will walks in.

He’s wearing a black button-down shirt and grey sport coat with jeans, hair mussed, and he looks simply beautiful. He walks in slowly, his eyes resting on Hannibal for just a moment before he looks at the scene Hannibal created for him. His rapt expression makes Hannibal look at the figures to make sure they worked out.

The judge hangs in his robe, suspended over the courtroom, blindfolded and de-brained, holding the scales of justice and suspended by chains. He holds a file on which Toby Montgomery’s name can clearly be read.

In front of him is Toby Montgomery, but he’s been folded and bent inside out until his body resembles a human heart. A valentine. Around the heart, flowers of every description spay out in a riot of color and beauty.

Will glances at him and smiles in clear appreciation, and then walks closer to the scene and closes his eyes.

Hannibal loves watching him work. He moves his arms and his body jerkily as he thinks through the crime and the mechanics of what has happened to the bodies in front of him, and then opens his eyes and turns to Hannibal. “You can get Jack.”

Hannibal gets Jack, but Jack, Beverly, Zeller, and Price come in.

Zeller walks right up to Will. “So what do you think, Will? Is this the wizard of Oz gone wrong? A man without a brain, a man without a heart, and a killer without the courage to stay and face the consequences.”

Will glances at Hannibal nervously. “No. Any Wizard of Oz comparison is only accidental. This is about justice. Or injustice. At least on first glance.”

Beverly walks closer to the judge. “He’s holding a file that says Toby Montgomery. Do you think that mound of flesh is really Toby Montgomery?”

“He’s been broken, shaped, bent and twisted into the shape of a heart. Like human origami. A valentine,” Will says.

Jack holds up a hand. “Wait, a valentine? You think he’s trying to court another killer?”

Will shrugs. “It’s a courting gift. Offering up his heart. Without the flowers it might seem a bit stark but for the Ripper, this valentine is almost sweet. But it’s not for another killer. At least, not one like the Ripper.”

“What do you mean?” Hannibal asks. He’s prepared to hear Will deny any kinship with him.

“The presence of the judge with the file. It’s not because the Ripper has any particular problem with the judge or even the miscarriage of justice. It’s so the person he made the gift for knows that the man he made into a heart for his lover is no innocent.”

“So you think the Chesapeake Ripper is trying to seduce some poor girl with corpses?” Jack asks.

Will shrugs. “It doesn’t follow that because it’s courting it’s romantic. It could be he wants to persuade someone of something.”

“If he’s trying to impress someone, convince someone he’s worthy, does that mean that there could be killer on the horizon more vicious than the Chesapeake Ripper?” Hannibal asks.

Price crosses his arms. “I don’t know. I have certain expectations about a Chesapeake Ripper scene. This is a little bloodless and passionless for a love note, don’t you think?”

Will looks scandalized. “Bloodless? No, it’s not bloodless. The man who did this was seeped up to his elbows in blood. He took all the blood and the organs and he changed them from something smelly and vile to something beautiful. That he considers beautiful. Whether the valentine will convince the intended audience remains to be seen.”

“Why Toby Montgomery? Do you think that case would have any particular significance for the Ripper, or the person whose attention he wants to capture?” Jack asks.

Will shrugs. “The Ripper probably reads true crime articles and follows trials like the one these two were both involved in. I don’t think he’d particularly care about the morality of it all, but he might consider it a kind of challenge to attack such high-profile victims. Perhaps he wants to make the news. Get his work on the home page of Tattlecrime.com.”

“If the crime is about the valentine, about turning a bad man into the shape of a heart surrounded by flowers in the desire to turn an ugly thing into a beautiful thing—then why here? Why leave the judge and the heart here?” Beverly asks.

Will frowns. “My guess is that the motif of justice fit the setting. I think these designs are highly developed. Even if he worked in a limited time frame, he’s been thinking about these particular images in different contexts for years. This is a very public declaration of love. He wanted it to be seen and found. Somewhere where no one would touch it and meddle with it before they took pictures. And he wanted people to talk about the miscarriage of justice. Not because he cared, again, but because he thought his lover would.”

“What kind of response can we expect from this lover? Do you think he’ll respond in public as well?” Hannibal asks.

“Too soon to say,” Will says. He shrugs and puts his hands in his pockets. “I can only interpret the scene in front of me. I’m not sure how someone I don’t know will respond to it.”

Zeller sniggers and looks up from whatever he’s fiddling with his case. “Yeah, he’s not actually psychic, it just seems that way sometimes.”

Will falters somewhat, and Jack is there to offer him an arm.

“Are you okay, Will?” Jack asks.

Will nods. “Yeah. For some reason this one took a bit out of me. Did you get us hotel rooms? I don’t think I want to drive home tonight.”

“You’d only have to drive back here first thing in the morning anyway. My secretary booked us some rooms at the Hyatt just down the road,” Jack says.

“Will you take me back?” Will asks Hannibal. “And stay with me for a bit. I know you’re not my psychiatrist anymore but I’d kind of like to talk this through with someone.”

“Of course. I’m at your disposal,” Hannibal says. “I brought us some meals from my freezer if you’re hungry.”

“Of course you did,” Will says, smiling wanly. “I admit, I haven’t eaten much today.”

“I brought enough for us to have dinner and breakfast, too.”

Beverly raised an eyebrow. “How cozy. Did you bring enough for the rest of us?”

Hannibal smiles slightly. “I’m afraid I thought you’d be too busy to stop to eat.”

“And they are,” Jack said severely. “Thanks for feeding Will, Hannibal. Maybe try to get out and get some fresh air. I’ll talk to you both later tonight.”

Will follows Hannibal silently out of the courthouse, and only when they reach the street does he lean closer and say, “Do you think Jack realizes how much that it sounded like he was getting you to look after his dog?”

Hannibal grins. “I would be happy to keep you walked, watered and fed.”

Will rolls his eyes. “Take me back to the hotel, Hannibal.”

Hannibal opens the passenger door for Will and can’t resist guiding him into the seat with a hand on the small of his back. Will notices and gives him a look—somewhere between smoldering and impatient—and gets into the car.

Chapter 12

The ride back to the hotel is quiet. Will's apparently collecting himself after what he'd seen. Or thinking about it. Not expressing any feeling about it either way, to Hannibal's deep unease. What if Will hadn't liked it? Perhaps he thought it was sentimental. The flowers had been…obvious, perhaps. The entire effort mediocre. Perhaps he wanted Hannibal to take him to the hotel room to laugh at the feelings his display had made glaringly obvious to Will. Tell him in private that he could never love a monster like him.

His godling is cruel, so it's entirely possible he'll find Hannibal's efforts inadequate. After all, he hadn't seen fit to seek out Hannibal's help to make his display of Randall Tier. Had he perhaps had the help of someone else?

Hannibal finds the prospect both devastating and exciting. He would have to work harder. Be better. Do something even more spectacular. Find whoever helped Will and kill them in a dazzling way.

Will had been right, though. Those designs had been percolating in his mind for many years. Things he'd been saving for an occasion. It would be more than a simple challenge to come up with something better. It would be nearly impossible. Hannibal feels an unfamiliar wave of uncertainty settle over his shoulders.

Will's hand squeezes Hannibal's forearm. "Are you okay?"

Hannibal feels a tightening in his cheeks. Is he capable of blushing? He hadn't thought so, but he remembers a patient describing the sensation in that very way. His Will is making him blush. What a wreck he's making of Hannibal. It's intolerable.

It's wonderful.

It's the worst thing that's ever happened to him and he never wants it to end.

"Hannibal?" Will asks.

Hannibal glances over. Will's head leans back on the headrest languidly. His body is turned so he's looking at Hannibal.

"Did you like my gift?" Hannibal asks.

"I'll tell you in the room," Will says.

"Yours or mine?"

"Yours. Jack is less likely to bother us in your room. He finds you intimidating."

"A fact I take full advantage of."

Will laughs. "I've seen it. I've been jealous of it."

“Jack isn’t so bad. His bark is worse than his bite.”

“Says the man he doesn’t bark at.” Will takes his hand off of Hannibal’s arm and Hannibal immediately misses the warmth. “There’s the hotel.”

Hannibal finds a parking spot and they get the rooms quickly as Jack’s secretary had already done everything and all they have to do is pick up a key card.

They walk to the elevators and up to the room. Hannibal opens the door and Will walks in first. Hannibal steps in after him and closes the door. He turns to face Will and Will slams him into the wall. He raises his arms automatically to fight Will off but then Will pulls his face down and then Will’s mouth is on his.

Hannibal melts. Will kisses him—if this tooth clashing, bruising assault can be called a kiss. Will must feel that Hannibal isn’t fighting him, because the kiss gentles, but it’s still bruising and urgent. Hannibal puts his hands on Will’s waist and tentatively tugs at his shirt. He pulls it out of Will’s pants and then his hands are under his shirt on naked skin. Will gasps and reaches for Hannibal’s top button, then rips his shirt open.

Hannibal ignores Will’s violence and applies himself to kissing his darling. He licks at Will’s tongue until the younger man gasps against his mouth. “So responsive to me, darling,” Hannibal mumbles.

Hannibal’s mouth moves down to Will’s throat and he licks and teases more delicious sounds out of Will. Will allows the onslaught until suddenly he doesn’t, and he pulls Hannibal towards him and then against the opposite wall in a loud thud. They’re still only in the hallway, and he groans as Will’s curly hair caresses against his cheek whilst Will tugs at his clothing.

“The bed,” Hannibal says.

Will growls and the sound goes straight to Hannibal’s cock. Though Hannibal is a proud hedonist, he’s never allowed himself to be a slave to sexual attraction. But he’s never felt like this before. Will yanks him further into the room and then shoves him down on the bed. Hannibal falls.

Will crawls over him and then they’re kissing frantically. The clothes they’d been partially successful at rumpling before now come off in a series of pulls and tears. Then they’re naked but for their socks and underwear, and gasping, touching and kissing each other everywhere. Hannibal’s usual style of seduction was an almost choreographed exploration of his partner’s pleasure—for the purpose of manipulation, of course—but this is something entirely different. This is frantic, dangerous bliss. He grasps at the edge of Will’s boxer shorts.

“Can I take these off?”

Will hips thrust up to rub his hard cock against Hannibal’s leg. “You’re going to start worrying about consent now? About this?”

“Answer the question,” Hannibal says, his voice low with desire.

“If you don’t take them off I’ll bite the flesh off your face,” Will says viciously, and from the look on his face, Hannibal believes him. He pulls off Will’s tight little boxers and the smell of aroused male wafts up to him. Now Hannibal is not hard, he’s painfully hard. His Will wants him.

“You liked your gift?”

Will crawls off him and walks naked into the bathroom. “Take everything off so I can thank you properly.”

Hannibal hurries to remove his socks and underwear, wondering what Will is doing. He can’t be getting anything from their luggage because they left it in the car. He’s not sure where Will’s luggage is, but Hannibal’s luggage is in the Bentley. Probably Will’s luggage will be brought to him, as he has the FBI trained to follow him around taking prodigious care of him. The suckers.

Will comes back, completely naked, now, looking as delicious and aroused as a naughty Greek sculpture.

He has a bottle of moisturizer in his hand, and he rubs some on both of his hands, then he’s on top of Hannibal again, and his cock is in Will’s slippery hand and then Will’s cock joins him there and they rub together in a silky motion almost too delicious to believe. Will writhes and thrusts and kisses at Hannibal’s mouth. Things begin to blur as pleasure joins pleasure. Hannibal joins him in frantic motions, gasping into his mouth as Will cries out in pleasure, and the thrust and retreat chases waves of joy until they come together and apart and then they lie gasping in each other’s arms.

Will’s head rests against Hannibal’s chest. “So that happened.”

“You liked it?”

Will raises his head. “Of course I liked it.”

“I didn’t know. You’ve left me in doubt quite a bit. I wasn’t sure if you felt anything for me but contempt,” Hannibal says.

Will nuzzles his head into Hannibal’s chest and Hannibal pets his head. He’s always wanted to touch Will’s curls, and now he can run his hands through them. They’re softer than he’d imagined. “I hope you’re not going to kill me now.”

Hannibal frowns. “Why would I do that?”

“Because you’re obsessed with me. Often if stalkers and obsessives start to get to know the person they’re obsessed with they stop seeing them as an ideal. They’re just a regular person who does stupid shit and farts and burps and they cease to fascinate. I can imagine if that happens to you you’ll feel betrayed probably kill me.”

Hannibal rolls over, pushing Will down into the bed as he looms over him. “I’m not obsessed with you. I love you. I worship you. You’re my master and I’m your slave.”

Will laughs—a big belly laugh and that smile that transforms his face in a way that Hannibal adores. His beautiful laugh lines. “Can you hear yourself? One of these days you'll realize I’m nothing special and you’ll kill me. Or gut me to get away in case I tell Jack. If you gut me, cut me here,” he says. He edges out from under Hannibal slightly and traces a path across his belly. “I miss the scar you gave me.”

Things that Hannibal had only half-believed previously come together. His Will believed he had lived another life in another timeline, and the knowledge Will possessed that seemed to spring out of nowhere seems to confirm that his belief has a basis in reality. After all, how else could Will have known about Georgia Madchen before he knew anything about the case? How could he have known Hannibal was the Chesapeake Ripper? How could he know things about Hannibal and his thoughts that Hannibal had never told anyone? Perhaps it's because Will is his lover now, or perhaps it's because he wants to believe time can reverse itself, but the acceptance that his Will has lived in another place with another version of him settles over him. “I cut you in this other timeline you remember? Why?”

“Because I betrayed you. Our time together—this time when we courted each other—was different. You’d framed me for Abigail’s murder and other murders, too. The copycat murders. I was bitter. I was drawn to you the same way I am now but I wanted to kill you. To hurt you. I went to Jack and convinced him you were the Chesapeake Ripper. We played cat and mouse. I killed Randall Tier and I pretended to kill Freddie Lounds. You knew, somehow, that I hadn’t killed her, and you were…enraged. Then I warned you the FBI was coming for you. But you didn’t leave. You cut Abigail’s throat in front of me and gutted me.”

“And what did you do?”

“I retreated into the quiet of the stream,” Will says dreamily. He sighs. “It wasn’t the only scar you gave me. If our scorecard was drawn in scars, you won.”

“Did I really win?”

Will shrugs. “In the end, it turned out like this. You wanted me. Focused on you, always. You were prepared to do anything to get it. Sacrifice years of your life. Give yourself up, admit who you were. For me.”

“Is that what convinced you that you belonged with me?”

“No,” Will whispers. “It was killing with you. A terrible dragon. A giant of a creature, more beast than man. But we attacked him like wolves.”

“My darling,” Hannibal says. He doesn’t know what Will means, truly. He’s probably speaking in metaphor. But his words are beautiful. They kiss some more. Soft, light kisses. Affection, now, not leading to any kind of arousal or release. He laughs. “How will we get our clothes? Neither of us brought our luggage.”

Will hums thoughtfully. “I think I’ll leave you to figure that out. My clothes are in Beverly’s car. I don’t know how I can get them without tipping everyone off as to what happened here.”

“Are you ashamed to say we made love?” Hannibal asks, affronted.

Will laughs. “We’ve been together all of twenty minutes, Hannibal. You really think this is an appropriate time to hitch my wagon to yours, in front of the FBI, when you’re a notorious serial killer? Can I have a minute, first?”

“Either you want me or you don’t,” Hannibal says stiffly.

Will sighs. He lies on his back beside Hannibal who does the same. “I do. I can’t seem to do anything else. But can we really tell Jack and Beverly and whoever else that looking at two corpses got us so excited we fucked?”

Hannibal turns his head and smiles. “I don’t think Zeller would be surprised.”

Will rolls his eyes. “Zeller wouldn’t be surprised if I fucked someone on top of one of his corpses. He doesn’t have the highest opinion of me.”

Hannibal turns on his side and props up his head on his hand. “You’re right. It’s not the appropriate time. Besides, I’m going to have to take steps to ensure I won’t lose my license over this. Not that I care if I can’t be a psychiatrist, particularly. It’s a nice diversion, but you’re far more important to me than psychiatry. But if I lose my license on ethical grounds —”

“—It makes you look suspicious. I know. So we have to keep a lid on it for a minute. Firing you as my psychiatrist—will that help it seem less like an ethical lapse?”

“A certain amount of distance between when I treated you and when we started seeing each other helps, although as far as records go, you were never officially my patient. Just that first assessment, and nothing else.”

“But Jack and Alana know what the records don’t show.”

“Yes. And who knows how either of them will feel about this? I suspect Jack will at the very least pretend to be angry about it, to cover for how upset he’ll be to lose some of his power over you to me. And Alana does like to scold people, plus she’s made a play for both of us at various times in the past few months.”

“Alana made a play for you? Did she kiss you?” Will asks, his face dark.

“She did. I considered being with her to make you jealous, but I couldn’t. I just didn’t want to take my eyes off you long enough to bother.”

“Well, at least your obsession’s good for something,” Will grumbles. Will runs a hand over his naked belly, feeling for something. That missing scar, Hannibal realizes. “I’m hungry. And you need your clothes. I think I ripped your shirt apart.”

“I might have to sew on a new button or two, but the shirt is fine,” Hannibal says.

“I didn’t know counts sewed their own buttons.”

“I didn’t know you knew I was a count,” Hannibal says. Will says nothing, and Hannibal understands this to mean he’s serious about wanting some food. He puts on his undershirt,

suit jacket and pants, and sneaks down to the car, hoping he doesn't see anyone from the FBI.

He is successful until the trip back, when his dishevelment is not as obvious because he's carrying garment bags, a cooler, and his other luggage.

"Where's Will?" Jack asks in the hallway near his room.

"He's fallen asleep in my room. I'm afraid I had to sedate him."

Jack seemed comforted by this, as though it justifies his worldview that Will would be distraught after seeing Hannibal's installation. "I have his luggage from Beverly's car. I can put it in Will's room if you get his key."

"Just leave it outside my door. I'll bring it in after I hang my things up and he can take it in himself when he wakes up."

Jack nods. "Would you care to come down to the hotel lounge for a drink?"

"I really should make sure he wakes alright. As you know, Will's nightmares rarely let him rest peacefully."

"I understand. Let me know when Will's in any condition to discuss the case."

Hannibal hears the when, and nods curtly. Jack doesn't care what condition Will is in, he just wants to hear him say more about the Ripper. No matter what the cost.

He opens the door and shoves his garment bags and other luggage into the closet, then goes back into the hallway and gets Will's bag. He brings it and the cooler into the room and sees Will lying languid and pale on top of the covers without a stitch of clothing.

"Did you hear Uncle Jack in the hallway?"

"I trusted you could handle it," Will says.

Hannibal sets down the cooler and starts taking out food. Luckily Jack knows that Hannibal prefers a kitchenette and has the FBI spring for one whenever they travel. This one doesn't have much, but it does have utensils, plates and a microwave, and Hannibal plates and heats up some food for the two of them. It's not fancy, but he knows Will doesn't mind.

He brings the food over to the bed. Will sits up and takes the food. "Thank you, Hannibal," Will says.

Hannibal feels his devotion to Will bloom and grow like a flower opening its petals in the sun.

Part 3: Chapter 13

Will stands under the stream of the hotel shower and silently berates himself. What the fuck is he doing? He'd played his hand. He'd kissed Hannibal. Did more than kiss Hannibal. He hadn't even known he wanted to do that stuff with him until he was doing it.

Okay, he'd thought of it. But he'd never thought he'd actually do it. A part of him is ashamed of himself for actually falling into bed with Hannibal. But there's another, secret part of him who's feeling pretty damned satisfied with itself. And not just because that orgasm has him feeling more relaxed than he'd been in…ever. The slow-burn romance that he hadn't thought would ever be consummated has been consummated.

And how.

So far Hannibal still seems to like him, though Will doesn't have a lot of confidence that this trend will continue. The longer they spend time together—the more he lets Hannibal see him as he is and not just as Hannibal wants him to be or believes him to be or thinks he has the potential to be—the more likely it is to all go to hell.

He steps out of the shower, dries himself, and quickly gets dressed. He's back in his own room, now. A moment of respite before he and Hannibal have to go see Jack and act normal. Give good, sensible answers about a murder scene he knows Hannibal created for him. Fuck. Hannibal looks at him like he's a masterpiece painting worthy of study but Will's fraying around the edges.

The other things he'd done—other ways he'd altered the events of his life—had been within his frame of reference. They'd been…similar to things he remembered from his other life. Similar, but he'd had the upper hand a little because he knew what Hannibal was capable of. He'd never taken a leap like this before. And he didn't know how it would go. How Hannibal would react.

And that's terrifying.

Perhaps it's the years Will spent with cortisol flooding his system, but there's something comforting about not knowing what's coming next. Something that frees him from responsibility. He can let Hannibal take him over; he can subsume himself to Hannibal's will.

He'd never really done that before. He'd never been so convinced that Hannibal had no intention of hurting him. He's fairly certain Hannibal will hurt him in the end, but he doesn't think Hannibal plans on it.

What's the worst that could happen?

Will shudders at the thought. He looks down at his hands and sees they're shaking. There's a knock at the door which snaps him out of his reverie.

He opens the door and Hannibal pushes in, closing the door behind him. He kisses Will urgently, as if he'd been holding himself back and could no longer contain himself. Will grabs his lapel and kisses him back, surrendering to his desire and forgetting his worries in his satisfaction at just having Hannibal this way.

Will pulls away. "Where's Jack?"

"In the bar. Tell him you're sick. Make an excuse. Please," Hannibal says. He descends on Will's throat and licks a path of fire along it.

Will pushes Hannibal until he hits the other wall of the hallway. They both pant desperately. "I think I have enough lies to keep track of, thank you. If you want, you can stay in your room."

"No, please. I'll be good. Don't banish me from your sight, my love," Hannibal says.

Will figures Hannibal is one harsh word away from going down on his knees and begging. Will doesn't think he could actually handle that, so he pulls Hannibal into a hug. "Come with me. Just try not to look at me like, you know, you do."

Hannibal clings to Will. "I'll rein it in. I'll be cool and collected."

Maybe he'd done too well with his campaign to make Hannibal focus on him. He's actually a little taken aback. Although who knew? Maybe Hannibal felt this way standing on the cliff with him, or standing in front of him in the hospital for the criminally insane, or kneeling in front of Jack to surrender to the FBI, only he didn't think Will would be receptive to his effusive affection.

Will isn't sure he's entirely receptive, now.

But he gives Hannibal a quick peck on the mouth and reaches for the door. They find Jack at the bar and Hannibal orders the three of them a round of an expensive Scotch Will probably won't even appreciate, but it'll keep Jack happy. And if he has enough of them, he might not notice that Will and Hannibal's mouths are swollen from kisses and Hannibal keeps on looking at Will as if he's an oasis in the desert.

Will doesn't want to think about how he might be looking at Hannibal.

Jack must not be on his first drink, because he's friendly to Will, complimentary towards Hannibal, and doesn't mention the Ripper at all. After two more of Hannibal's top-shelf Scotches, Jack discloses why he's so cheerful. "I don't want the Ripper dropping bodies. You know that. I'm not out here wishing for bodies. But new bodies mean new evidence. And I'm not exactly crying about these two particular victims."

Will glances at Hannibal, who's trying to suppress a smile. Will doubts Hannibal had foreseen that killing racists might cheer Jack up a little bit. He sips his Scotch. He could get used to Scotch like this. He sighs. "I'm sorry, Jack. Nothing's jumping out at me. I'm not seeing that bit of new evidence that could take us in a new direction."

Jack grins. “It’s the forensics I’m counting on. Every body is another chance for the Ripper to make a mistake. Drop a hair. Pollen. A bit of plumbing pipe. You know the drill, Will. This is our next chance to make it right.”

“We will, Jack. We’ll find him,” Will says.

This seems to be all the work that Jack requires from Will for the evening.

They all walk up to their rooms together, and Jack’s room is beside Will’s, so Hannibal doesn’t have the opportunity to join Will in his room. Will is relieved and disappointed in equal measure. Hannibal sends him a text asking if he should sneak into the room, but Will replies that he’d rather wait until they’re back in Baltimore.

Jack’s on the other side of the wall. Banging the Chesapeake Ripper with Jack in the next room is a little much, even for Will.

The next day Hannibal invites him to his hotel room for breakfast, and they eat quickly before going to the autopsy.

“Maybe we did things in the wrong order,” Will muses as he puts his bags in Hannibal’s car. They are planning on being back in Baltimore that night, so they checked out of the hotel.

Hannibal looks concerned. More concerned than he should, given the circumstances. “What do you mean?”

“We should have eaten after the autopsy, not before it,” Will says. He narrows his eyes. “What did you think I was talking about?”

“Nothing,” Hannibal says.

“No, Hannibal, tell me,” Will says as they get into the car.

Hannibal doesn’t start the car. He turns to Will. “I thought you were upset about last night. Perhaps wanted to slow things down or forget what happened. Start again. I assume sharing something like that with a man was a new experience for you.”

“Did I seem that inexperienced, Hannibal?” Will asks bitingly. “I don’t have gay panic or any other kind of panic. I’m wondering if you do, now, though.”

“Will, please,” Hannibal reaches over and takes Will’s hand in his. “Please forgive me if I don’t say or do the right thing. I’ve never felt like this before. I’m desperate to do the right thing.”

“Don’t treat me like glass, Hannibal. Don’t be careful with me. I don’t want you to. I want you, and you don’t know the meaning of the word careful,” Will says.

“You really haven’t been panicking all night?” Hannibal says. The careful note is gone from his voice and his eyes are sharp.

“I panicked. A bit. It was more about the fact that you’re a serial killer than the fact that you’re a guy, though it’s interesting you think my masculinity is so fragile.”

“You’re a former police officer from the South whose primary interest is fishing. Forgive me for momentarily buying into the stereotypes.”

Will laughs outright at this. “You think I care what anyone other than you thinks of me? Most of them aren’t even people to me. None of them matter, as long as we have each other. As long as I can talk to you. Be in your orbit. It’s all I need, Hannibal.”

“And sex?” Hannibal asks.

“I told you, I liked it.” Will squeezes Hannibal’s hand. He almost says he’s surprised Hannibal is insecure about his sexual performance but then realizes he doesn’t actually have to taunt him. He doesn’t even want to. Will’s phone chimes with a text from Jack. “He’s waiting for us,” Will says.

The bodies are remarkably free of forensic evidence, but something about the marks from the cutting implements interests Beverly. Will doesn’t like encouraging her to have insights that might get her killed but he can’t exactly tell her to let it go just because he remembers her dead.

They find a chemical on the flowers that suggests that they were picked on a farm rather than from a garden, and they phone around to the largest flower farms in the area, asking if they had any larger orders of flowers purchased in the time frame of the murders. One of the farms tells the team about finding several rows of flowers missing around that time instead.

Some technicians go to the farm to take molds of any tire tracks and check around to see if the killer left anything behind.

Will raises an eyebrow at Hannibal. “Do you think the killer got sloppy?”

“If he felt a burst of affection for his lover—if he altered his plans to make the corpses more beautiful and appealing for them at the last minute—it’s possible he could have made a mistake,” Hannibal says.

Will crosses his arms. He’s not sure how to feel about that. He’s fairly certain if suspicion falls on Hannibal it will fall slowly enough to enable them to run. It’s another reason to keep Jack in the dark about their relationship. Will would be the first person Jack came to if he suspected Hannibal. If Jack knew they were involved Will wouldn’t be able to sound the alarm and would probably be a suspect, too.

By the end of the day they have some leads—nothing major—and decide to leave the scene for the locals and go back home.

Beverly approaches Will. “So should I assume you’re hitching a ride with the doctor?”

Will frowns. “What makes you think that?”

“He brought you breakfast and dinner, and you’ve been attached at the hip. Whatever issue you had with Hannibal seems to have been resolved and the bromance is back on. I swear, I need them to hire a woman. I thought you and I could be the dynamic duo but it’s bromances all around and I’m not in any of them,” Beverly says, her eyes twinkling.

Will shrugs. “There’s always Jack.”

Beverly pushes him away, laughing. “Enjoy your intellectually stimulating conversation. I’ll just sit in silence, staring at the highway.”

“You seem to forget that I was with you on the way here. I’m pretty sure you don’t need me in the car to sing along to musicals,” Will says.

Beverly smiles. “No, but it helps.”

Will wonders what Beverly would think if he told her he’d been avoiding her because he didn’t want Hannibal to get jealous and murder her. Although it was her suspicions that got her killed before, not her closeness to Will. Maybe he could ease up and be friendlier with her.

But maybe he can’t. Hannibal’s obsession with him is…unsetting. Hannibal seems on the verge of losing control, and Will has never seen him lose control before. When he’d gutted Will and killed Abigail, that had been close, but he’d still had some control. Hannibal’s feelings about Will are probably more comparable to his feelings at the point in time when Hannibal sent the Tooth Fairy after Molly than the point in time when he killed Beverly. Not that he was going to marry Beverly…but Hannibal had wanted Molly dead or otherwise out of the picture because she was a way Will had hid himself from Hannibal’s regard. And so Will can’t afford to become close to people who Hannibal might consider distractions. He can’t put other people in danger by becoming close to them and risking Hannibal going batshit on them.

As he climbs into Hannibal’s car he thinks to himself that he’d heard similar sentiments from victims of spousal abuse when he was a cop. Some of them had seemed so proud that their man was jealous, and now he had no space to judge them. Maybe their abuser had made them feel like an equal. Like a god. Or maybe there was no frame of reference or comparison because he and Hannibal were something new.

Some new form of madness, maybe.

Chapter 14

Will dozes in the passenger seat as Hannibal drives. They'd agreed that he could get his neighbor's kid to look after his dogs for another night and he would spend the night at Hannibal's.

The Bentley pulls up to Hannibal's house around six, and Hannibal turns to Will. "I'll start dinner right away, if that works for you."

Will has an imaginary flash of Hannibal as the witch in Hansel and Gretel, eager to fatten him up. He pushes the thought away. "I'll get the bags sorted and bring everything in while you get that started."

Hannibal hops to it, and Will is left lugging the bags upstairs. He leaves everything on the bed, frowns at the mirror on the ceiling (was Hannibal a porn star and a serial killer?) then goes out to the car to lock everything and get the cooler. He brings it into the kitchen. "Where do you want this?" he asks.

"In the laundry tub through that door," Hannibal says, nodding to his left. "Just leave the Tupperware right in it. I'll see to it later."

Will walks in to find an immaculate laundry room and puts the cooler in the laundry tub, double-checking to make sure there's no food remaining inside to rot. He comes into the kitchen and says, "I actually wouldn't mind doing my laundry in a room like that."

"Bring it over next time," Hannibal says. "This house is well organized, but perhaps not ideal for the dogs. Maybe we should plan on buying a house somewhere between where you live now and where I live, near a park or wooded area."

Will doesn't bother to mention the fact that they've been in a relationship for a little longer than twenty-four hours. He feels sort of desperate at the thought of going back to his house alone, too. "I was thinking today that if the team found a piece of evidence that led to you as the Ripper, Jack would come to me. If he knew we were dating, he wouldn't."

"You want to wait to say anything about our relationship until this particular Ripper investigation has died down?"

"I think it's the smart move. You said yourself that you might have made a mistake with those flowers. I don't know. Is there any way the vehicle you took to get them from the farm could be traced back to you?"

"It's unlikely, but possible. I paid for it cash, and didn't buy it personally. An agent bought it on my behalf."

Will snorts. "I hope I wasn't Miriam Lass."

Hannibal stops chopping. Stares. "How on earth?"

Will picks up a piece of carrot and pops it into his mouth. “I wouldn’t want to inhibit your creativity by telling you exactly what you did in my time, but I’ve met Miriam Lass. I always suspected you had her helping you out, because a smart woman like that couldn’t just exist in a darkened room, or even with a pile of books, without going crazy. You must have her working for you somehow.”

Hannibal’s look of admiration deepens, and Will realizes that if Hannibal ever gets bored of him, he can just drop some knowledge that proves he’s a time traveler into the conversation.

Hannibal drops his knife and reaches for Will. Will goes to him, prepared for some flowery compliments but instead receiving a passionate kiss. Will leans into it, lets arousal burn through his body and rocks his pelvis into Hannibal helplessly.

“Let me, please Will,” Hannibal says.

Will makes a sound of wordless acquiescence and Hannibal drops to his knees. As he loses himself in the pleasure Hannibal gives him, he can’t help but think of being gutted in this kitchen. Seeing Abigail die here. He tries not to wonder if the recollection makes him come harder.

Hannibal gets up and wipes his mouth happily, then gets back to cooking.

“Are you…?” Will half asks awkwardly.

“Clean yourself up and set the table, my darling. And pick a bottle of wine. I want a Beaujolais for this meal, but the rest of the decision can be yours.”

Will silently mutters about this condescending phrasing, but wouldn’t dare complain out loud about anything to someone who just gave him a blow job. No one he’d ever been with had ever been so free with sexual favors, if you could call it that. And he hadn’t even thought about the fact that he was putting his dick in a cannibal’s mouth. Much.

He sets the table and finds out where the wine is and which wine is a Beaujolais, by the skin of his teeth. He finds a corkscrew and opens the bottle, and by the time he’s poured the wine Hannibal has plated the food and set it down in front of Will with maximum drama and a small speech per dish.

Will smiles indulgently. “It looks glorious. Are we eating long pig today?”

“I’m afraid I’ve frozen the meat I most recently harvested and stored it somewhere inaccessible. In case something went wrong and the forensic lab felt the need to test the food in my freezer. But this meat came from the finest butcher in Baltimore, for what that’s worth.”

Will raises his glass. Hannibal swirls and sniffs his glass pretentiously before delicately touching it to Will’s. Will has to smile again. He’s always liked this pretentious version of Hannibal. He supposes it’s mostly genuine.

“You seem happy, Will,” Hannibal says.

“You make me happy,” Will replies without thinking.

Hannibal blinks in surprise, and then smiles wider than Will can ever remember him smiling. “It’s nice, isn’t it? Not to be alone.”

“As long as it’s with you,” Will says, thinking about Molly. You could be with someone and still feel lonely.

Hannibal frowns. “I need to tell you something, but I hope it won’t upset you. I don’t bring it up to cause friction, but I also don’t want you to hear about it and get angry with me. I couldn’t bear it if you were angry with me, darling.”

Will laughs. “Well, I know you didn’t sleep with Alana. What else could you have done to make me mad? Did you kill someone I like?”

“I spoke to Abigail. She called me. Gave her access to some fake IDs, and gave her and Georgia some assistance with Georgia’s medical troubles. Sent them some money, too.”

“So you know where she is?” Will asks, his anxiety climbing by the moment.

“I don’t know exactly where she is. But if she’s using the IDs I helped her procure, I know the name she’s going by. I could find out the address she had put on her ID with a phone call, and if that didn’t work, I could find her easily in other ways.”

“Are you going to hurt her?”

Hannibal puts a hand over Will’s. “I have no intention of hurting her, Will. I gather my other killed her in revenge for a betrayal of yours. But you’ve learned your lesson. I can see from how you look at me, from what you say, that you know better now than to try to live without me. We’re conjoined. Neither of us could safely survive a separation. And the more time we spend together—the more we twist our feelings and our lives around each other—the more that will be true. I used her, before, to control you. I won’t do that again. She can be our daughter, for real this time. I can give you that gift.”

“You won’t be jealous if I love her? You won’t try to come between us? To destroy whatever relationship I might build with her?”

Hannibal picks up his drink. “You may have as many friendships and relationships as you choose, darling. I would never try to steal all your love for myself.”

This is such a blatant lie that Will can’t help but show his doubt on his face.

Hannibal sighs. “I will try not to.”

Will leans towards Hannibal, and speaks desperately, his voice shaky. “Hurt me. Just. If you need to hurt someone to control me, let it be me. Don’t take people from me. All it will do is drive a wedge between us. And I don’t want to be apart from you.”

A calculating look passes over Hannibal's face and Will realizes he's given something away. He wants to think he can trust Hannibal, but he knows Hannibal likes to punish him. And he won't say that he likes being punished—he won't go that far, but it hadn't stopped him from falling in love with Hannibal. Maybe he was a little like a beaten dog, in that other life. Hannibal had conditioned him to act a certain way, be a certain way, and he had felt a certain satisfaction when he pleased his master.

But he must stop thinking this way. Hannibal doesn't even know that version of him. He doesn't know how much he can bend Will to his will. He shouldn't ever know.

There are means of influence other than violence.

"You know how I feel on the subject," Hannibal says. "I want you with me always. I don't ever want to look away. Not from you."

Will leans closer to Hannibal. "I want you inside of me tonight."

Hannibal's eyes widen. "Will, you don't have to take that role. I never would have imagined you would want that. We don't ever even have to—"

Will rolls his eyes. "I know. I'm not a straight guy who was secretly a bottom all along but also I know we don't have to have penetrative sex to make it a real relationship. I'm almost forty, Hannibal. I don't need you to talk to me like a seventh-grade sex education instructor."

Hannibal frowns. "I just want you to be comfortable. I want you to be happy and comfortable with everything we do in bed."

"Well, you can get rid of the mirror on the ceiling then. The last thing I need to see if I wake up from a nightmare is my own face. I'm not even sure I'd find it sexy if we were having sex under it."

"Yes, of course. Consider it done," Hannibal says impatiently.

Will leans even closer to Hannibal, so close he can feel the soft puffs of Hannibal's breath on his own face. "I want you inside of me, because I want you inside of me. Not just your cock. But you. Inside my mind, my heart. My every thought. My body. I want you to fill me up with you to the brim. I want you in my mouth and my ears. So if there's a way for you to invade me we haven't tried, I want you to do that. Now."

Hannibal inhales sharply, and then pulls back. Will wonders how he's miscalculated when Hannibal stands up and moves away, his hands shaking.

Will opens his mouth to say something, but Hannibal holds up his hand in a silent plea for Will to stop. He stops.

"My darling, how you move me. You make me lose control. Nothing makes me lose control, especially not sexually, but how you test me. I could ravage you right here and now, and I would never forgive myself. I want to make your first time, every time you consent to make love with me so amazing you want to repeat it again and again. I want to make you feel as

good as you make me feel just by existing in this world and allowing me to love you. I can't hurt you, Will. Not in that specific way. Not the first time."

Will nods, trying not to let his shock show on his face. Maybe Chiyo had been on to something with that other means of influence business.

Hannibal takes a deep breath and continues, "Please, give me some time to regain control."

"Do you want me to leave?" Will asks.

"No! No, of course not. I would never want that. Please, just leave me to clean up. You can go upstairs. Unpack. Have a shower. Your natural scent could never offend me, but you might feel more comfortable being freshly showered your first time. Or you can take a walk. I just need." He doesn't go on but it is obvious that he just needs Will to be away from him. Will understands the sentiment—there had been many times over the years when he was so immersed in Hannibal he just needed a moment of space to recover himself. To find himself again in that cloud of influence. Of course, Hannibal could say what he wanted about not wanting to hurt Will, about having mercy, but he'd never allowed Will that kind of mercy he'd just begged Will for. Not until he'd surrendered himself to Jack, at least.

Will nods. Gets up and makes his way upstairs. He decides to have a shower, catches his own eye in the bathroom mirror and shakes his head at the audacity of the man he sees reflected back at him. He wonders what the Jack he knew—the one who'd empowered him to 'seduce' Hannibal a different way and go kill Francis Dolarhyde—would think if he could see him now. A part of Will is almost proud. Like he's successfully house-trained a tiger.

It's probably unwise to ever share a thought like that with Hannibal. Even though right now he'd probably readily agree with the appropriateness of the metaphor.

Will contemplates Googling the statistics on how often wild animals turned into pets attack their masters, but resists the urge and steps into the shower.

Chapter 15

Hannibal takes a while. Will wonders if he's whipping himself with birch switches like a medieval monk doing penance. He wouldn't put it past him. Lithuanians might do that anyway. Do they do that whole sauna thing or was that only Fins?

Will has already toweled his hair dry and changed into this last clean pair of underwear and white t-shirt. He'll have to go home tomorrow—or use that nice laundry room. No, he has to go home. There are his dogs, and plus, the longer he stays the further he falls under Hannibal's spell, and that's not the plan.

He sits gingerly on the edge of the bed and glances up at the mirror on the ceiling. What a creep. Why couldn't Hannibal just watch porn like a normal person?

Will feels genuinely queasy at the thought of accidentally seeing himself having sex or waking up drenched in sweat. Hell, even catching his own eye in the dark. Mirrors are not his friend.

"I'll have it removed at once. For now, we could move into the spare room? It's cleaned regularly and shouldn't be particularly dusty."

Will flinches at the unexpected voice. Hannibal stands in the doorway, tie off, shirt unbuttoned. Disheveled in a way Will hasn't seen him disheveled since last night. He remembers the first time he'd seen him mussed—when he'd been caught sleepwalking by the police. Part of him had been attracted even then. Hannibal had been disarmed, half asleep, and quick to smile.

"Are you alright?" Hannibal asks.

Will gestures towards Hannibal. "Just taking you in."

"Do you like what you see?"

Will nods and stands up. Hannibal holds out a hand and Will takes it. Funny, that this sex act that is condemned by so many religions and societal handwringers is probably the most innocent thing Hannibal will ever teach him.

Even cooking is less innocent than this, when Hannibal teaches it.

Hannibal leads Will into a spare room and lays him out on the bed like a sacrificial victim.

Will frowns. "You want me to take this off?" he asks, gesturing to his underthings.

"I love what you're wearing. I fantasize about that exact clothing selection, having seen you wear it before. What makes it your chosen bedclothes, my dear?"

Will laughs. “I could get a six-pack of each at Walmart and wear a different one every night. Sometimes even change in the middle of the night. Pajamas get expensive if you can only wear them for one night before you sweat through. Besides, cotton breathes.”

“Are you still experiencing night sweats? You didn’t tell me that. I didn’t notice anything last night.”

“Not like I was. I felt like I was becoming fluid. Spilling out of my bed. And it was every night. Now, if I have a bad nightmare I might wake up sweating, but more often I sleep through the night. My nightmares are usually connected to something Jack asked me to look at.”

“You don’t have to do that anymore,” Hannibal says. He takes off his suit jacket and then his shirt, then takes off his belt. Then his shoes and socks.

“Are you jealous? When I leave your mind and go spend my time in someone else’s?”

“You never leave my mind, not really. And I never leave yours.”

“But is that why you’re always telling me it’s bad for me to look at other killers? Or was that just a strategy to push me into doing it more and exposing me to more homicidal influence?”

Hannibal sighs. “I push, but I don’t create. I told you I didn’t think it was good for you to be inside those killers’ heads because I didn’t think it was good for you to be inside those killers’ heads. You made the choice to go inside anyway. You made this choice many times, with and without my influence.”

Will concedes privately that this is probably true, but doesn’t give Hannibal the satisfaction of verbal agreement. He pats the bed beside him. “Come lie down,” he says. He pauses, then grins. “Hey, do Lithuanians do saunas?”

“Yes, saunas are very popular there.”

“Do you do the birch switch thing?”

“I haven’t for many years, although it is part of the Lithuanian sauna experience for many people. I spent my youth there but haven’t been back much. I don’t have fond memories. Why, were you interested in trying it?”

Was he interested in trying it? Will feels uncomfortably curious, but doesn’t want to talk about it. “Just curious about you.”

Hannibal’s eyes sparkle. “You think I was self-flagellating to gain self-control just now?”

“I wouldn’t find it out of character. You’re no masochist but sometimes it seems like you’re living in another era. A man out of time.”

“My kills would be reasonable for a Samurai warrior in certain time periods in Japanese history.” Hannibal trails a hand down Will’s chest, stopping at his hipbone and lingering.

“I don’t know, that sounds racist,” Will says.

Hannibal smiles slightly. “I could say the same about knights in many countries in Europe. My brand of terror would be highly prized by certain warlords as a fear tactic.”

Will laughs. “You could still find work that way. Just go kill people for a drug cartel.”

“Are you stalling, darling? We don’t have to do anything you’re not comfortable with tonight, or any night.”

Will stares at Hannibal with intensity. “Then kiss me, already.”

Hannibal then treats Will to a sensuous avalanche of kisses and caresses all over his body. Somehow, their clothes are gone, and Will dissolves, subsumed by an overwhelming and decadent assault that leaves Will with only incoherent sounds of pleasure on his lips. When fingers breach his body he feels them everywhere, and then, when Hannibal joins their bodies Will feels laid bare, like his skin has been removed and he’s lying flayed and bleeding, the pleasure so sweet it’s almost pain. He almost sinks into imaginings and references—a cathedral of light and dark—but Hannibal grabs hold of his head and squeezes his skull, forcing eye contact.

“You’re with me, Will,” he says, his voice a growl. “You’re here with me. We’re together. One.”

A beast with two backs, Will thinks irreverently, but suppressing the laughter that wants to bubble up grounds him in this moment and he locks eyes with Hannibal as he pumps into Will’s body, waves of pleasure pulsing with the rhythm of his movement, and a feedback loop of intense emotion from Hannibal to Will, and back to Hannibal, and to Will again makes the experience expose Will even more.

The release of orgasm is stunning and almost alarming. Will gasps and sees black stars cloud out his vision, and realizes he’s almost fainted. Like a damsel in a romance novel overwhelmed by letting go for the first time.

Hannibal probably has smelling salts. He’ll have to ask him to have them handy next time.

Will’s vision clears and he becomes aware that his body has turned to syrup. Languid and sticky. Hannibal is smelling him and caressing his body with his nose like a woodland creature, and for a moment the image of the wendigo overlaps with Hannibal and Will feels his heart swoop with fear and something like affection.

“Was it okay fucking without your porno mirror?” Will asks, panting.

Most people would have been offended by such a crass statement ruining the afterglow, especially people who routinely murder the rude, but Hannibal only says, “Why do I need a mirror, when I have you?”

Will isn’t sure if he means because he can see his feelings reflected in Will’s empathy or because he’d rather look at Will than himself. He’s a bit afraid to ask so he doesn’t.

Hannibal asks, “What did you think about it? Did you like it enough to do it again?”

And again, and again, Will thinks. But he’s not sure he wants to appear too eager. He has a feeling Hannibal will make any and all of his sexual fantasies come true, which…is honestly a little worrying. There’s something to be said for having one prude in the relationship to keep things a bit…normal. He glares at Hannibal. “You know I loved it,” he says, rolling his eyes.

Hannibal squeezes him into a hug. “Yes, but it’s nice to hear the words. You can take me, if you want. I would like it, if it were you.”

“Cause it would be like making a clone and having it fuck you?” Will asks.

“Making love has made you quite rude,” Hannibal says, his voice impossibly fond. “What shall I do to punish you?”

“Dealer’s choice,” Will says. He waits but no punishment is forthcoming. He lifts his head and sees Hannibal has fallen asleep. Hannibal looks young and pretty in sleep, and Will looks away quickly before he starts having tender thoughts. Love, intensity, and obsession he can deal with, but feeling tender about Hannibal? That’s a step too far.

He drifts off, and then sometime in the middle of the night Hannibal wakes him and they fuck again. Will’s a little sore and that makes him come that much sooner, a fact which he’s sure doesn’t go unnoticed. In the afterglow, Hannibal again mentions switching roles, and Will stretches out and feels a delicious ache in muscles he didn’t know he had.

“I don’t think I want that, if you’re okay with it,” Will says.

“Why not?”

Will sighs. “I’ve only been with girls—women—and that means I’ve had to be in charge that whole time. I really like being more…receptive. I like how I can lose myself in it. Maybe that’s unfair to you.”

“I’m happy to continue as we are. Nothing can compare with the feeling of being inside you. I only wanted to let you know that you are welcome in my body in every way you’ve made me welcome in yours.” He pauses, then continues, “I’m surprised that your experience with women has been that way. Women can be quite aggressive, and you’ve got rather…boyish and angelic looks. I’m surprised you haven’t been ravished by women.”

The only woman who had been sexually aggressive with him had been Molly. Molly had taken his bluntness, his aggressiveness, and assumed it was just him being socially awkward. She’d somehow decided he was sweet. Whenever he said something insightful and cutting, some part of her said, “The poor dear, what must other people think when this sweet man says something like that?” She had assumed his acerbic remarks were shyness, somehow, and had kissed and touched and made love to him to show him she accepted him despite his nature. It had worked, (of course it had worked), but it hadn’t been real.

“You know me. I can be…harsh. Rude. I can be a real dick sometimes. Women who agree to date guys like me usually want…”

“To be thrown against a wall and fucked?”

Will laughs. “Yeah. And I was happy to provide. But…this is nice. Better for me. I like the way you take care of me and make sure I feel good. And…” And it’s nice to be seen. Maybe the sex had been almost as good for Will with Molly, but she hadn’t seen him. Didn’t know him. She had thought he was a sweet man, and Will might be many things, but he’s not a sweet man. Hannibal can see Will deep down into his viscera, all the tar and blackness he hides from the world, and adores him anyway. Loves him for it, not in spite of it.

“Yes?” Hannibal asks, waiting for Will to finish his thought.

“I see you, Hannibal Lecter. And I love what I see,” he says.

Hannibal’s eyes glisten in the semi-darkness. “That’s all I’ve ever wanted, my darling. My other half. My soul.”

“Okay, let’s not get carried away,” Will grumbles.

Hannibal laughs.

Will frowns. “Why is it okay when I do it?”

“When you do what, darling?”

“When I’m rude? I’ve been rude to you this whole time. You’d kill other people who talked to you the way I do. Even before you loved me.”

“I’m starting to think I loved you long before I knew I loved you. Perhaps nearly since we met. But I believe the answer to your question has something to do with your superiority to the rest of humanity. You have every right to look down on others. To decry my sentimentality and to make light of feelings we share. You understand the world, and why you feel things. The people I kill are so…inferior…they don’t even understand why they’re upset. They burned the roast last night so they’re unable to regulate their feelings with a stranger. They’re automatons, just taking out their frustrations on other people when they could learn how to deal with them and be much more pleasant with others as a consequence.”

“I suppose they could see a psychiatrist,” Will muses. “What if their psychiatrist tries to convince them that murder is the only way to deal with their frustrations? Is that a more pleasant way to interact with the world?”

Hannibal shoves Will away, laughing. “You’re unspeakably rude. I will find a punishment for you, darling.”

“Yes, I always call people darling when I’m livid with them, too,” Will jokes.

Hannibal gets out of bed and demands Will rise as well. Will looks at his watch. “It’s two in the morning.”

“You’re hungry. And I’d like to make you churros for a midnight snack.”

Will is hungry. Maybe his stomach growled or Hannibal can smell hunger on him. And churros sound delicious.

“Lead on, MacDuff,” he says, and Hannibal pulls him to his feet.

Chapter 16

Two weeks of bliss follow, and they get to the point where Will is bringing his dogs to Hannibal's more often than he's going back to his own place. Hannibal claims he would be just as happy at Will's, and Will knows Hannibal can rough it when he chooses, but there's something so much more delicious about mussing up Hannibal's pristine house. Covering sofas of antique silk with pet hair and dog slobber.

Will pretends it's him being a socialist but it's definitely really him being a malevolent shit, and Hannibal knows it, and loves him for it. He does Will's laundry, cooks him meals, worships and makes love to him.

If Hannibal's obsession is really going to wane with familiarity, it hasn't happened yet.

One lazy Saturday afternoon when Will and Hannibal are playing an intense game of chess, someone knocks on the door.

Hannibal lets Jack in.

Jack walks into the living room without taking off his shoes or coat. He looks at Will.

"I didn't know you'd be here. You're a difficult man to find these days. Have you been ignoring my calls?"

He'd listened to the messages. He had to know if Jack had any suspicions about Hannibal. Will shrugs. "I needed a break."

"I thought you were better now. Able to wrestle with any demons I send your way without psychiatric help," Jack says.

Will sits up straighter. Something is up with Jack. He's usually a bit more careful around Will, considerate. This abruptness is worrying. "I don't need anyone to tell me when I need a break now—but that's because I can decide for myself. What's up? Is there a case you need me to look at? I thought you were here to see Hannibal?" He'd implied that he didn't know Will would be there, so he must have wanted to see Hannibal.

"I need you both," Jack says. Jack looks over at Hannibal for practically the first time since he got there. "Will's car is out front. Is it okay if we go separately? I'll drive you, and Will can take his own car. I'd like to talk with you on the way about a private matter."

"Of course. Will can drop me home afterward," Hannibal says.

Jack waves his hand dismissively. "If not, I can have a trainee drive you. Let's go."

Will and Hannibal exchange a glance as they put on their outerwear. Something is up with Jack, and they've distanced themselves from him accidentally with their absorption in each other so much that it's impossible for even Will to guess what's going on in his head.

They go their separate ways, and Will calls Beverly on his hands-free.

“What the hell is up with Jack?” he asks her without preamble.

“What are you talking about?” she asks.

“Oh come on, don’t go all evasive. He’s acting like I pissed in his cereal. Did something go wrong with an old case? Did I fuck something up?”

Will wracks his brain. Maybe they found Abigail. She has many excellent qualities, but she’s not the type who would hesitate to throw him to the wolves if it was in her interest to do so.

Beverly says something muffled, like she’s talking to someone else with her hand over the receiver, then says, “You’ll find out soon enough. I assume you’re on your way here?”

“Yeah, I was at Hannibal’s when Jack came over. He demanded I take my own car so he could talk to Hannibal privately. What the fuck is going on? Did something happen with Jack’s wife?”

“Just—get here. The sooner you get here the sooner you’ll know what’s what,” she says, and she hangs up without saying goodbye.

“Well, you’re no help,” he mutters. He considers calling Alana but suspects it would do him no good. Even when she disagrees with Jack she goes along with him. If Jack doesn’t want him knowing what’s going on, he won’t.

He’d almost forgotten what it was like, not knowing what comes next. “It fucking sucks,” he says, banging his palm on the steering wheel.

When Will gets to the office, he’s not sure if he’s imagining that people are looking at him funny. He usually avoids looking at people and so it could be they always look at him like he’s a disgusting alien. Maybe Freddie wrote something about him on Tattlecrime? But she had no reason to look in his shed, because he hadn’t been convicted of murdering Abigail in this timeline so she had no personal reason to have it out for him. And he hadn’t been catfishing Hannibal, so he’d disposed of Randall Tier’s body properly anyway. If she’d broken into his shed or his house there was nothing incriminating to find.

Finally, he arrives at the lab and is immediately shunted into the board room. Not quite an interrogation room, but it’s not normal, either. Hannibal and Jack are already there, and Beverly. Jack and Beverly are on one side of the table, file folders sitting neatly but ominously in front of them, and Hannibal sits opposite. He gestures for Will to sit beside him.

“Holy shit, do I need a lawyer?” Will asks.

“Why would you say that?” Jack says irritably. “Did you do something wrong?”

“You seem to forget that you’ve accused me of murder before. I know the signs.”

Beverly leans back in her chair and smiles. “You’re imagining things, Will. Have a seat.”

Neither Jack nor Hannibal's face reveals anything, so Will sighs and takes a seat.

"You've been busy," Jack says.

"Not really. Just not up to coming in, like I said," Will says.

"I said, you've been busy," Jack shouts.

Will tries not to flinch. Fails. How did HR not send Jack to an anger management course every other week? Maybe they did, and it just took the edge off. Will looks at Beverly, and she opens her folder. She takes a picture and slides it across the table to him. He catches it and looks at the corpse. The man looks like he's been stabbed a dozen times.

"Do you recognize this man?" Beverly asks.

Will tilts his head. It's hard to tell. People look different when they're dead. Their facial muscles relax, and how often do we see people with their eyes closed? But this man—"Is he…does he work in a store in Wolf Trap? He looks familiar, but I can't really put my finger on it."

"Your DNA was found on his body. We have your DNA, you know. We all give a sample so that if we accidentally contaminate a crime scene the DNA that got there by accident can be excluded," Beverly says. That last part seems to be for Hannibal's benefit, but hell, maybe she thinks Will is so crazy he's forgotten giving a DNA sample to her.

Will sneers. "Are you confessing to framing me? Gee, thanks for saving me the trouble of defending myself."

"Will, this is serious!" Jack shouts.

Will looks at Beverly. "I'm just imagining things, huh?"

The door opens and Alana walks in. "Let's all just calm down, okay?"

"You want me just to calm down and accept my coworkers accusing me of murder, Alana? Seriously?" Will says.

She looks at Jack, then sits down. "Put your personal feelings aside, Jack. What questions do you need to ask Will?"

Jack takes a deep breath and points to the picture. "What's your relationship with this man?"

Will squints at the picture. "I still can't quite place him. Does he work at the hardware store?"

"His name is Philip Grainer. He owns the grocery store. The one where you got hit by a car," Jack grates out.

Will frowns. "So you think I killed him to retaliate for an accident I don't even remember? An accident, I might add, that wasn't serious and ended up getting me live-saving treatment in the hospital for the serious illness I had?"

“You were seen exchanging angry words with this man not a month ago,” Jack says.

Will narrows his eyes. “Jack, think about who you’re talking to. I exchange angry words with everyone. I don’t even remember talking to this person. I’m not good with people. If you seriously think everyone I’m ever rude to is a potential murder victim—”

Hannibal places a restraining hand on Will’s arm. “Jack, what is the approximate time and place of this murder?”

Jack glares. “It’s not just one murder!”

“Wait, there’s more?” Will asks helplessly. He looks at Hannibal, but he knows Hannibal hasn’t had the time to kill a bunch of people. He’s been too busy catering to Will’s every need. He refuses to believe Hannibal wants him in jail these days. Maybe one day he’ll send Will to the insane asylum, but not yet.

Hannibal turns to Beverly. “A list of the times and places of the murders, if you please.”

Alana is looking at Hannibal oddly. “Hannibal, your job here is to look after Will’s mental health during the interrogation. You’re his psychiatrist, not his lawyer.”

“I’m here as Will’s friend. I haven’t ever been his psychiatrist.”

Beverly looks at Jack, who sits back and gestures for her to hand the list over to Hannibal. She sifts through the papers in the folder and then hands a typewritten sheet over.

Hannibal scans it, then looks up, smiling slightly. “Well, that clears things up. Will is being set up.”

“How do you figure?” Jack asks.

“He wasn’t near any of these places on these dates. This one,” he points to a date on the sheet, “He was with me all night. This other one he was out of state fishing. I wasn’t with him, but I’m sure he was caught on a camera somewhere between here and there. This one we were walking in the state park miles away, weren’t we, darling?”

Will looks at the dates, and nods. Hannibal’s right. Turns out having a constant companion is good for alibis, if nothing else. Will looks across the table and sees Beverly, Jack, and Alana’s expressions. All of them are shocked in different ways: Beverly looks scandalized but vaguely pleased, Jack looks relieved, and Alana looks like she’s about to cry.

“You can prove that?” Jack asks.

Will swallows his annoyance that they’ll all take the local cannibal’s word over his, and listens to Hannibal prove they were together. It all apparently checks out, or is verifiable, because Beverly runs off to confirm his story.

Jack narrows his eyes. “I can’t believe you’re dating another psychiatrist.”

“It feels like most of the people I know are psychiatrists,” Will says weakly.

“At least the last one wasn’t your psychiatrist,” Alana shouts, putting all her emphasis on the word your. “Hannibal, this is beyond the pale. Will is your patient. Even if he fired you a few months ago, that’s no excuse. Your relationship has a power imbalance. It’s incredibly irresponsible to manipulate a client into sleeping with you. Will isn’t even gay, or he wasn’t, until you convinced him he was! This is clearly an ethical violation.”

Will frowns. “You really don’t think I’m capable of forming normal relationships, do you?” Not that his relationship with Hannibal is particularly normal—but she has no way of knowing that.

She raises a hand. “Will, I’m not angry with you. This isn’t your fault. I can get you help.”

Jack tsks. “I mean, I think that’s a bit much, Alana. Love is love. Just because they met each other in an unconventional way—”

“Stay out of it, Alana. You’re just upset that you came on to both of us and we rejected you in favor of each other,” Will snaps.

Alana gasps. She glares at Hannibal. “Now I see what happened. You poisoned him against me. Convinced him he was in love with you with therapy. You won’t get away with it. There might not be any paperwork that says you’re his psychiatrist, and maybe Jack’ll bend his ethics enough to back you on that if he gets to keep his pet psychopath whisperer. But I know the truth. You spoke to me about your sessions with Will. I’ll tell the state psychiatry board —”

“Tell them what you like,” Hannibal says. “I assure you, my relationship with Will is worth losing my ability to practice psychiatry altogether.”

Jack looks as pleased as a father giving his daughter away at her wedding. “You love him that much?”

“More,” Hannibal says.

“You’re all insane,” Alana says. She storms out of the room.

Jack smiles. “She’ll come around. You two make a cute couple. She’ll see that eventually.”

Will can’t help but laugh at Jack. He isn’t sure if Jack is so supportive because he’s just relieved he gets to keep his favorite murder-investigating team together, or if he’s been shipping them all along.

On the way home Will asks Hannibal, “You weren’t the one who set me up, were you?”

Hannibal manages to place a hand on his heart like a scandalized southern belle even while driving. “Of course not. I couldn’t stand to be parted from you. If I knew for certain I was going to jail I might endeavor to make you join me—but I think honestly I’d be more likely to take you on the run with me so both of us would avoid incarceration altogether.”

“I’d join you. Happily. If you were ever in doubt.”

“In prison?” Hannibal asks playfully.

“In some foreign land. I’ve heard good things about Tashkent.”

“Uzbekistan? It does look beautiful, but I’m partial to Florence.”

“If you think we’re going to go live in a country where you’re known as Il Mostro so you can get caught and put in the electric chair—or whatever Italians do to serial killers—you’re crazy. I’m taking better care of you than that. Maybe a visit, but you’re not living there. And you’re not killing anyone anywhere near Florence.”

Hannibal stares in adoration for so long Will has to remind him to watch the road.

Chapter 17

Hannibal and Will sit at the kitchen counter eating an unpretentious meal while they brainstorm what the hell is happening.

“So you have no foreknowledge about someone who would frame you for murder?” Hannibal asks.

Will swallows his food and wipes his mouth. “Nope. Unless it’s you. Or Freddie Lounds.”

“We can look into Freddie Lounds. But I believe if she was setting you up, she would find a way to benefit from it financially. It would be all over Tattlecrime.com.”

Will nods. “And as a super fan, you’d already know all about it.”

Hannibal makes a vaguely offended scoffing noise. “I’d hardly call myself a super fan. But I am a regular reader.”

Will sniggers and takes another bite. “God this is good. What are the unforeseen consequences of me eating well every day all day? What if I get fat? Will you still love me if I’m fat?”

“I’ll love you no matter what. But I’m feeding you healthy food, so it’s unlikely you’ll suffer any negative consequences. And as you can see, it’s not always a seven-course affair in my kitchen.” He pauses and pours some more sauce on his chicken, then continues, “What about killers you’ve put away? Do you think one of them could have had a partner who is taking revenge?”

Will puts down his fork. “Maybe. I don’t know of any killer I found who had a close friend or partner who escaped justice the first time around. Like I don’t remember thinking it was two people and it ended up being one.”

“Could it be that when you changed things you angered someone who wasn’t angry with you in the other timeline?”

“It could be. Or maybe someone was angry with me before but since I was wrongfully imprisoned and then gutted they thought I had enough problems.”

Hannibal stands and clears the dishes off of the counter. “In my experience, seeing that someone I want vengeance on is in pain or difficulty just makes me think of ways of taking advantage of their weakness.”

“Maybe it’s Margot Verger. Her brother was the worst person in the world and I’m sure she’s glad he’s dead, but I did kill him, and maybe she’s one of those people who thinks that, you know, family is family and I need to pay for killing him.”

“I tried very hard to persuade her to kill her brother, and she was extremely resistant despite truly desiring his death. I don’t think she’d make the jump from that level of reluctance towards murder to killing three innocent people to frame you. I would find it more likely that she would spend her time trying to prove that you were guilty of her brother’s murder rather than framing you for other murders. After all, with the money she got from her parents' estate, she could probably have you thrown in jail if she so desired it.”

Will feels a vague sort of pleasure Margot got the money after all. Good for her. “Yeah, you’re probably right. It is a change, though. Maybe Mason—he had these evil Italian pig farmer henchmen who were weirdly loyal to him. Maybe it was one of them.”

“That I can see,” Hannibal says. He puts soap in the dishwasher and turns it on, then washes his hands and walks back to Will. “I know my own family had very loyal retainers. We’ll look into it. You seem more familiar with the Verger family from your timeline than you are in this one.”

“Yeah. You made Mason feed his face to my dogs. And you broke his neck, leaving him paralyzed and disfigured. So he came after you—and me, cause I happened to be nearby and he had other reasons for hating me—and he almost killed us both.”

“And you saved us all this trouble by killing him painlessly before he could do anything terrible to us.”

Will rolls his eyes. “Don’t get all disappointed you don’t get to do crazy torture stuff. He almost fed you to his pigs. What if this time around he succeeded?”

“Tell me more about your time, darling,” Hannibal says as he pours Will a drink. He pours himself something, and gestures with his head for Will to follow him. They get cozy in the living room, and Hannibal hands Will the drink.

It’s a far better whiskey than Will’s used to, and he savors it for a moment before he settles on something to tell Hannibal. “Alana actually married Margot Verger in my timeline.”

“My goodness. Really?” Hannibal looks scandalized and pleased.

“Yeah, I don’t know exactly what happened, but I think her sleeping with you and then finding out you were a serial killer might have had something to do with her swearing off men. Just a guess.”

“So you preventing her from dating me might have actually kept her from her happy ending?”

Will shrugs. “It’s not like I did anything in particular to prevent you two from getting together, other than being in a coma, which wasn’t exactly my choice. When you framed me and sent me to jail, by the time I came out again, you and she were an item. I think you preyed on her weakness—her feelings of betrayal when she thought I was a serial killer—to get her to sleep with you and act as her alibi.”

“This is very interesting. Will, darling, how did you get this chance to change your fate? What did you do to make the teacup come together?”

“It’s not anything you’d ever want to duplicate, even to save your sister. I. I held you and jumped off a cliff, taking you with me.”

“I went over, as well? Did I fight you?”

“No. You let me decide. Or fate. I don’t know. You surrendered to the moment.”

Hannibal is silent for a long moment, and then says, “You had a do-over. You knew what I am, and how I love. And you chose me, on purpose this time.”

Will winces a little at the wording. It doesn’t feel like he did this on purpose. But he’s here, and he had every opportunity not to be. He ran to it; he ran to Hannibal. He doesn’t know what to say, because he’s not like Hannibal and he doesn’t really have words to say how he feels.

“So you really do love me, then?” Hannibal asks.

Will rolls his eyes. “Can we talk about who’s setting me up, please? I’m thinking we can handle anything so long as we do it together, but it’s still unsettling to be here yet again. Makes me feel like there’s some kind of fate involved where no matter what I change it’s all going to come around again, and there are some parts of my previous life I could do without.”

The doorbell rings.

Hannibal rises. “Hold that thought.”

Will hears Alana’s voice in the kitchen.

“I’ve had time to think about what I said today when I heard about your involvement with Will, and I’d like to apologize,” she says.

Hannibal makes some reply in a soft murmur, and she continues speaking.

“I wanted to talk to you about it, still. I don’t think you’re to blame for any wrongdoing in regards to Will. I know you. Your sense of ethics, your moral code is beyond reproach. What I said about you using therapy to convince Will he was attracted to you when he wasn’t was…I’m extremely sorry. I know that couldn’t possibly be true. I’m not sure it’s even possible, and I know sexuality is fluid. I probably sounded like a homophobe and you know that’s not me. It’s not who I want to be. So since I know that’s not true, it can only be one of two things. Either you fell into this relationship with Will because you truly love him more than you care about keeping your career and the respect of the community—”

“I should warn you, Alana—”

Will imagines that Hannibal is trying to be polite and warn Alana that Will can probably hear them speaking, but she continues before he can.

“Hannibal, you have to know what Will is capable of. He’s been different since the encephalitis. An infection like that can cause permanent personality changes, and I think we have to face the possibility that Will isn’t the same man he used to be. He’s been cold, manipulative. And he’s had it out for you. I know how deeply it hurt you to lose Will’s friendship when he came out of the coma. Has it occurred to you that he did that—that he cut you off—to make you miss him? To make you need him?”

“Alana, you don’t know—”

“I know you, Hannibal. I would have thought I knew you better than anyone, but when I think back to the way he’s treated you since the coma, I can’t help but see a pattern. He dated your therapist, which must have alienated you from her. That meant you didn’t have anyone to talk to about the rejection he dealt you. He isolated you from her by dating her. This is a clear pattern of abusive behavior. What if he wants you to fall for him to ruin your life, as some kind of sick revenge for some wrong you didn't even commit? I never would have thought it about Will, because he can seem sweet when he tries. But he’s not who you think he is. I’m almost sure of it.”

Will really has to give her credit. She’s a smart woman. Too smart. He gets up and walks into the kitchen.

“You really need to work on your situational awareness, Alana, or didn’t you notice my car in the drive?” he says.

“Will,” she says. He waits but she doesn’t say anything more. Her eyes are wide and frozen in fear. It’s a hard pill to swallow but she’s actually afraid of him.

“You’ve got a lot of faith in Hannibal, Alana. But thinking I’m abusing him? Honestly, isn’t that a bit much?” Will asks. He really, really wants to tell her the truth about Hannibal, because it would be so satisfying to see her faith crumble—but then he doesn’t like the person she becomes when she loses that part of herself that could have faith in people. Besides, he’d have to kill her afterward, and that’s not something he thinks he could get away with.

Alana sighs heavily. “Yes. It is a bit much. But the two of you weren’t even friends a few weeks ago. You were so angry. Hannibal was devastated. What the hell happened between you that now you’re so madly in love Hannibal’s willing to give up his career?”

“That’s between Will and I. As long as the two of us are happy with our feelings for each other, it shouldn’t concern anyone else. That’s how things work in a romantic relationship, Alana,” Hannibal says.

“Yes, and you’ve both made it very clear you’re not interested in my being in any way involved in that,” Alana says darkly.

Will blinks. “Were you…hoping we could all be in a relationship together? I’m not into that. Or you.”

Alana laughs harshly. “You’ve become so cruel, Will. And Hannibal, I’ve never known you to tolerate cruelty towards your friends. You’ve changed.”

“You’ve spent every moment since you entered my home without invitation insulting the person I love more than my life out of nothing more than your own confusion and hurt. If anyone’s being cruel, it’s you,” Hannibal says.

Will tilts his head and eyes Hannibal. He actually looks mad. Hannibal looking mad is rare… and dangerous. Alana might actually be in danger.

“You should go,” he says to her. He reaches over to direct her by taking her shoulder but she moves it away before he can. He lowers his arm and follows her into the foyer. “Listen, I know this is confusing for you. We didn’t expect to be here, either. We’re both kind of weird people who never thought we’d have something real. Never thought the broken pieces of us could ever find an exact match to the broken pieces of another person. But we did. And we’re not willing to give it up. Not even willing to discuss giving it up.”

Alana laughs slightly, but there are tears in her eyes. “I’ve known him for years. He’s always with someone perfect. A socialite, or someone who is at the top of their field. Someone who looks amazing on his arm. I guess it never occurred to me that he wanted something more than an arrangement but thought he couldn’t have it. He just thought he couldn’t have something real so he had something that would benefit him. Do you think that’s true?”

Will crosses his arms. “I don’t know. We haven’t talked a lot about things like that. Our romantic pasts.”

“He just doesn’t seem like a passionate person. His other relationships were like business mergers. The way he talked about giving everything up for you made me think there was something off about your relationship. I’m sorry.”

Will squints. “Hannibal? Not a passionate person? Are you…are you joking? Have you seen the way he cooks? He’s like a character in an opera. He’s like the most passionate, melodramatic character in the history of opera.”

Alana laughs again and this time it sounds almost genuine. “I guess maybe you do know him better than I do after all. Tell him I’m sorry for what I said, and you should know I’m sorry for what I said about, you, too. It wasn’t nice to let me say those things without telling me you were listening—”

“Pretty sure Hannibal tried to tell you,” Will mutters.

“—But I know you wouldn’t abuse Hannibal or anyone else. I was just really thrown. It was like you both became different people for a minute and I thought I knew you both so well. If the two of you weren’t who I thought you were…”

Will doesn’t want her chasing anything down that rabbit hole. She should stay blind. Even if it would be satisfying to see her realize who Hannibal was—hell, it would be satisfying for her to see who Will was, too. Wipe that lipstick smirk off her face. But it will be safer for everyone if she says blind. He shrugs and smiles as sweetly as he can manage. He channels

that ‘sweet man’ he used to pretend to be for Molly. “I guess I can only say that love changes people.”

Alana smiles wanly. “Yeah, that must be it.”

Chapter 18

Will walks back into the kitchen, but Hannibal has moved to the living room. He follows him, and finds him standing by the fire, glowering.

“We’re not killing Alana,” Will says.

Hannibal shrugs. “I’d rather we do it together but I’m fine killing her alone.”

Will walks over to him, crowds into his space. “I like our life. I like it. I don’t want to have to be a fugitive. I don’t want to go to jail. We have motive to kill Alana. Normal police with no training to spot criminals like us could find us because motive is one of the few things they actually train the police to look for.”

Hannibal shrugs elegantly. “I thought motive was something for the district attorney to worry about. Police mainly just arrest people they find holding the murder weapon, and the rest of the killers go free.”

“They would suspect us because we got in a shouting match with Alana in public, Hannibal. Yes, cops are easy to fool, but not when you transparently hate someone.”

Hannibal sighs. “Fine. I suppose I won’t kill her right away. I did always consider her to be a friend. Is that the only reason you want to keep her alive?”

Will rolls his eyes at Hannibal and moves over to the sofa, throwing himself down on it and then picking up his drink. “I didn’t get her out of here because I’m secretly in love with her. I don’t have any of those feelings for her anymore. Do you?”

Hannibal’s expression doesn’t change. “I never felt anything for her. Not even genuine friendship, really. She was lovely to look at and a convenient way to seem normal by appearing to have a friend.” He steps closer to the sofa. “Are you jealous of our friendship?”

Will glares. “Stop fishing for compliments. Come sit beside me and put your arm around me if you’re feeling insecure.”

Hannibal does as he’s told, mumbling all the while that he’s not insecure.

When Will is secure in Hannibal’s arms, he snuggles closer and says, “So our only real suspect is those pig farming henchmen. It doesn’t feel right though. Those psychos would have just tortured me and fed me to pigs if they knew I killed Mason. They wouldn’t kill people and frame me for it. That’s a really personal thing to do, and like you said before, you’d have to want to kill innocent people. As psycho as those henchmen are, I don’t think they’re out combing the countryside for store proprietors to kill.”

“Maybe someone had motive to kill the three people and they had nothing in particular against you. Perhaps they only framed you incidentally.”

“No. It’s hard to frame someone. This person got my prints and my DNA. They must have it in for me to go to all that effort. Although, to be fair, it would be relatively easy to get those things because I’ve been away from home so often. Maybe it is just someone who noticed I was away and broke in to make me a patsy.”

Hannibal hums thoughtfully. “You know, the way this person framed you is unusual. Why go to all the trouble but then not bother to make sure you didn’t have an alibi?”

Will shrugs. “Maybe he followed me for a time before we got together. When I was out I was either at work or off alone fishing. Maybe he just assumed the pattern would hold.”

Hannibal nods. “A reasonable explanation. He never committed a murder while you were away with Jack. But that would mean that he is watching your house, so knows when you’re out, but also knows when you’re at work. So he knows your schedule, which wouldn’t be hard to find out for teaching, but also knows when you’re working with Jack. How?”

Will considers. “Sometimes Jack comes to the house and picks me up—or sends a car to take me to the airport. But definitely not always. But if I’m going out of town for work overnight, it’s obvious because I have someone come to look after the dogs.”

“He’s either in contact with the person you had watch your dogs, or he’s watching your house. He must be watching you. He must be practically living with you. Right under your nose.”

“But at a distance. The dogs would warn me if he was squatting in the shed—or even if he was staying in the nearby woods. Not because they’re particularly great guard dogs, but they’re curious. A new smell nearby would get their attention and they’d run over to it.”

“I wonder if people know how much your affection for your dogs is tied up with the fear you live with every day.”

Will knows Molly hadn’t known that. Hadn’t known Will loved dogs, but he needed them, too. Could mostly sleep only protected by the security they provided. Hannibal, of course, sees everything about Will and understands it.

Hannibal continues: “He has to be somewhere in line of sight of your cabin. Not necessarily close, but able to see it, possibly by telescope. Is there any place like that?”

Will nods. “Yeah. If he had a telescope, there’s a little cabin up in the woods overlooking the house. The person I bought the house from severed a bunch of property. I got ten acres, the hill with the cabin was sold off as a hunting retreat, and the fields in between that I walk on all the time were purchased by a property developer who intended to build some houses, but then the market crashed in ’08. I probably should put the place up for sale because now that the market is booming they might decide to develop it again.”

“Tonight we should go up there. Not to your home. We should park nearby and hike up to the cabin, see what we can see.”

“Should we tell Jack? It would help to clear my name if he was involved.”

“If we tell Jack, you’d have to get a warrant, and we wouldn’t be able to take revenge on this person who dared to come after you. Besides, what if it really is one of Mason’s henchmen? They might tell Jack that you killed him.”

Will agrees, and then Hannibal encourages Will to lay down for a nap while Hannibal gets their kit ready to go raid the cabin, as Hannibal doesn’t need a whole lot of sleep. Will isn’t much for sleeping, either, but he agrees to take a rest. When he wakes, he sees that Hannibal has laid out a black jogging suit for him. He puts it on and goes downstairs, and sees Hannibal is already dressed.

“Aren’t you worried about a doorbell camera catching us looking like robbers from a movie?” Will asks.

“I moved my car to the street. Your car is in the garage, and we should take it because no one will think it’s unusual to see your car in the area. No one will see us dressed like this. Besides, it’s not a crime to wear black.” He zips up a knapsack and stands, throwing the knapsack over his shoulder. “Did you think of a good place for us to park?”

“Yeah. The cabin is on the side of the hill facing my cabin. There’s a road on the other side—it’ll be a hike, but even with a telescope he won’t be able to see us approaching.”

They make their way to Will’s car and then drive to Wolf Trap. They park on a wide shoulder on the appropriate side of the mountain, and Hannibal shoulders the knapsack. Will has the fleeting thought that this is a pretty nice way to spend time and he hopes Hannibal will be amenable to hiking as a murder-free pastime in the future. There are beautiful hikes in Europe he’s always wanted to go on.

They approach the cabin from above. It’s dark, but their eyes have adjusted and there’s some moon to light their way.

“What if there are booby-traps?” Will asks.

“I can see quite well. I’ll go first and keep my eye out for any traps.”

Will rolls his eyes but trudges on. Of course Hannibal thinks he couldn’t be tricked by booby-traps. Will had seen them a lot as a cop. When he’d been a uniform cop he’d been involved in busting a lot of grow-ops and meth laps, and there were always cops getting injured by walking into bear traps or falling in holes. Well, if Hannibal steps in a trap Will will see him to safety (and probably laugh a little).

It turns out there are no traps, or if there are, they didn’t trip them. They approach the cabin cautiously. There’s no car outside. They look in the windows and see a simple cabin. There’s one bedroom, empty, a kitchen, a living space, and a bathroom.

“Nobody’s home. Shall we go inside?” Hannibal asks.

Will nods. The lock is rudimentary, according to Hannibal, who uses a metal plate to jimmy it. Well, it makes more sense than Hannibal using his platinum card.

They look around the cabin. Hannibal calls Will over to a telescope and gestures for Will to look through the eyepiece. Will sees his house. “You were right.”

“Do you think he’s off doing mischief, or did he see the police raiding your house and leave, thinking his job was done?” Hannibal asks.

Will shrugs and goes back to rummaging through the papers on the kitchen table. “Should we take these things with us?”

“If he comes back, we don’t want him to know we know he’s here. Take pictures.”

Will takes about 40 shots of the papers, and in the meantime Hannibal finishes looking through the rest of the cabin.

“Does this mean anything to you?” Hannibal asks, holding up a photograph.

Will takes the picture. “That’s my father, when he was young. And I don’t know who the woman is.” He flips the paper over but there’s nothing written on the other side.

Hannibal raises an eyebrow.

Will shrugs wildly. “I don’t know. Maybe he abandoned this lady somewhere along the way. Maybe he killed her.”

“Do you think your father is a murderer?”

“Maybe the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree,” Will says.

Hannibal puts a hand on Will’s arm. “Let’s get out of here. We can look at those papers later.”

Will takes a picture of the photograph and then Hannibal puts it back where he found it, and they leave. They hike down the mountain and Will thinks about his father. He hadn’t seen the man in years. Hadn’t been in contact with him in almost two years. Wasn’t even sure he was alive. They hadn’t had a falling out, and his father hadn’t abused him; they just didn’t keep in touch. Will probably should call him more often.

When they get to the car Will texts his father the photograph and asks him who the woman is. He doesn’t expect a response right away because it’s three-thirty in the morning.

Will scrolls through the papers, but it seems to be someone’s hunting permits and provisions lists. Probably the owner of the cabin. Will guesses that the person after him broke in in a similar fashion to how Hannibal broke in and has been squatting there, but he’ll run the name when he gets back to Hannibal’s just in case.

“Should we stop by your place and get more clothes for you?” Hannibal asks.

“Probably a good idea.” Even if he wasn’t a little leery of going back to live in a place that might be observed by an enemy, he’s getting addicted to living with Hannibal.

Hannibal turns into his drive. Jack had let Will know his home was not a crime scene anymore, although Will suddenly had a thought. “I threw out all the flies and tried to clean everything you might have planted in my house. You didn’t put parts of dead girls anywhere else in the house, did you? What if Jack finds them?”

“I cleaned everything weeks ago. Don’t worry, love,” Hannibal says.

Will wants to slap him, but generously refrains. He slams the car shut as he goes into the house and dumps his clothes into a duffel bag. Hannibal hovers in the bedroom door, but Will ignores him. The house seems different without his dogs. Will takes his fishing tackle and his fly-making kit because he wants to dirty up more of Hannibal’s house. He used to feel bad about mussing things but he’s colonizing, now.

Hannibal takes the equipment without comment, but when they’re about to leave, asks, “Will you be packing the boat motor, too?”

Will squints at him. Hannibal would actually let him; he’s sure of it. Hannibal got rid of the mirror on the ceiling and the spare bedroom is empty, so he’s probably redecorating it into a hobby room for Will. Or perhaps he wants Will to spend more time in the murder basement with him. He can see it now. How cute. Hannibal’s butchering people, and just across the room, Will’s tying flies.

“Maybe next time,” Will says.

“What’s mine is yours, darling, and that includes space to pursue your interests. But we should perhaps think about a workshop for you when we get our next place.”

“Yeah,” Will says. He gets in the passenger seat and waits for Hannibal to finish loading the car with his eyes closed. Hannibal gets in and drives, and they pull into the garage at just after five.

They change and put everything away, and Will lies on the bed scrolling through the remaining papers when his phone rings.

“Is it Jack?” Hannibal asks.

“No,” Will replies, looking at the screen of his phone. “It’s my father.”

Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

> As far as I can tell (or remember) the only canon about Will's father is that he travelled a lot, worked in boatyards, and probably was kind of poor. I didn't think he had an actual name so I called him Frank. If I've missed something please let me know.

“Where did you get that picture?” Will’s dad Frank growls down the line.

Will lies back on the bed and glances at Hannibal, who is ironing his shirt for the coming day. Hannibal pauses and gives Will his attention.

“Hi dad, how’ve you been?” Will says pointedly.

“Oh come now,” Frank chuckles. “You haven’t been sending me postcards all this time, either. I don’t remember getting any father’s day cards in the mail. Where’d you get the picture?”

“It’s…hard to explain,” Will says. “Someone set me up. For a couple of murders. I have an alibi for all of them, so I’m not in trouble. But we investigated this cabin near my house to see if someone had been watching me, and we found that picture. Do you have some…I don’t know…enemy? Someone who might wish me harm, and not feel too bad about killing like three people?”

“You better come down here,” Frank says.

“Are you still in Mississippi? I hate Mississippi,” Will says. “Can’t you just talk to me over the phone? We can do a video call, if you want.”

“I’m in Pensacola,” Frank says, “And it wouldn’t kill you to come visit me.”

“Okay. I’m bringing my boyfriend with me, though.”

There’s a long pause, and then Frank simply says, “Ayuh. I’ll text you the address.” He hangs up.

“Well?” Hannibal asks.

“We have to go to Florida.” Will’s phone chimes with the address. He puts his phone down. “I’m beat. When do you think you can clear your schedule to come with me?”

“Are you sure you want me to?”

“I don’t even like going to work when you’re not there. I thought you felt the same way. You want me to go off alone on a trip when a serial killer might be hunting me?” Will asks, on the edge of hurt. Probably due to lack of sleep more than actual pain, but. Still.

“Certainly not. I was asking you what you wanted, not waiting for instruction. Of course I’m going with you. I wondered if you calling me your boyfriend would make things awkward with your father.”

Will raises an eyebrow. “Always the shrink, huh? It wasn’t a big deal. It won’t be a big deal.”

“As long as you’re sure.”

“I’m sure. What about you? Can you leave Miriam that long?”

“Miriam is very independent,” Hannibal says, like the grown-ass woman he’s kept prisoner for years is a precocious teenager.

“You have to let her go. It makes me uncomfortable that you have her.” If Will hadn’t changed things, Miriam would already be free. It's started to really nag him that her life has not been made better by his changes. Somehow it feels like he’s the one keeping her prisoner.

“I need her.”

“You don’t.”

“Let’s table this. I’ll think about it, but I’m not going to just let her go on your say so. I have plans, and even though I love you dearly, those plans are necessary.”

“Yeah, let’s table it,” Will says. He doesn’t get why Hannibal needs Miriam. Hannibal had poked at the police and tried to get caught because he wanted to be seen. That’s what Will had always thought. He wanted Will or Jack or the whole team, maybe, to understand him. But he has Will, now, as thoroughly as you can have anyone. Will understands him in a way no one else ever will. The two of them share a life, a bed—hell, they practically share a brain. He closes his eyes. Hannibal is smart enough to avoid getting caught if he wants to, so he doesn't need Miriam unless he's planning something revealing and dangerous. Is it fame he wants? Why would you want fame when it came with a padded cell? Will sighs. “I’m going to call work and let them know I have to take some time. How long will it take you to clear your calendar?”

“I should be able to get away by midday Friday. We can take as much time as you think we’ll need early next week. Of course, if Alana decides to lodge her complaint, we might have all the time in the world.”

“I’m sorry about that,” Will says.

“Not your fault,” Hannibal says. He finally finishes ironing the shirt and starts fussing around and dressing. It’s ritualistic and weird, and quite frankly, hot. Will watches avidly. “Why don’t you call in sick today? You’re tired.”

“You really think Alana would take my class?” Will asks.

“Let Quantico figure out who takes your class.”

“I like teaching. I don’t want to be fired. I’ve taken enough sick days already this year.”

Hannibal shrugs. “You’re probably right. I’m sure it’ll be much less damaging to your career to be short with everyone and show how little you care about their delicate feelings. That’s how you get when you’re tired, Will.”

“Oh fuck off, Hannibal. I don’t need you mothering me,” Will says.

Hannibal gives him a smug look and trots off to make breakfast, and Will has a cold shower to wake himself up. He eats whatever Hannibal feeds him, kisses him goodbye, and gets through his day’s lectures. He sometimes stops by Jack’s office just to see if he’s needed, but he skips that today. Maybe it’s that he’s tired (or that they accused him of murder) but he’s not going to offer his services if he doesn’t have to. He goes instead to HR to beg for time off to go visit his father. He claims his father had a fall but is telling Will he’s okay and that’s why he needs to go to Florida—just to make sure his father doesn’t need care. No documentation needed and it could conceivably take some time. He gets the entire next week off. He doesn’t have class on Friday afternoons so he can leave as soon as Hannibal is able to leave.

He tries not to look over his shoulder too much the rest of the week. The person who set him up is likely going to be quite discouraged by him not being arrested, and that could lead to them acting out. Part of him wants to hang around alone in lonely places so the guy comes for him, and then he can see who he’s really dealing with. He might be in for a bit of a surprise. But maybe he wouldn't be surprised. Maybe he saw what Will did with Mason and wants to show everyone Will’s hypocrisy—the fact that he catches killers and also doesn’t mind killing people himself.

They’re doing the dishes Wednesday night when Will is shocked to discover that Hannibal claims he wants to drive to Pensacola. “It’s a thousand miles!”

“But I’ll be with you.”

“Is that your way of saying you want to take a road trip?”

Hannibal shrugs obliquely. Will rolls his eyes at Hannibal’s dramatics. He puts a hand on Hannibal’s. “How about this? We take a flight down there, and if it seems like we can take some extra time after talking to my dad, we’ll rent a car for the trip home.”

Hannibal’s look turns thoughtful. “Or, we take a vacation together after we deal with this person who is after you.”

“That sounds amazing,” Will says.

“And then perhaps we can talk about selling our houses and moving into a place that’s suitable for both of us. Perhaps one not overlooked by any lonely cabins.”

Will considers. There's a certain amount of plausible deniability in having his own place. If he lives with Hannibal properly, he's never going to evade capture if Hannibal gets caught. And considering Hannibal is still holding Miriam, he might not be too worried about being careful due to his backup plan. What would life be like without Hannibal, though? It's not worth contemplating at this point. "Okay. Let's do it," he says.

Hannibal's joy is muted but real. He kisses Will, puts down his dish towel, and goes off to plan a vacation for them, or look for houses. Will pours a drink and is about to join him when he gets a video call from Abigail.

He takes it on his phone in the living room, disrupting whatever Hannibal's doing in the process. Hannibal smiles at him indulgently and sits close to Will while he picks up the call.

"Hi Abigail," Will says.

She beams a smile. "Hi Will! Wait, is that Hannibal?"

"Yeah, we've been spending a lot of time together," Will says sheepishly.

"So I guess I don't need to confess about getting money from Hannibal," Abigail says.

"No, I know you're always going to do what's best for you," Will says. "As you should."

Will looks at the screen, taking note of the apartment behind her. It looks quite nice, in a college student way. There's movement behind Abigail, and then a beautiful blonde woman dips into view. He remembers when she looked like that in the oxygen tank.

"Hi Will," she says.

"Georgia?" he asks, laughing. Seeing her walking around, healthy and normal, makes everything he's done to try to change things worth it. It even eases the pain of Miriam, a little. "I can't believe you're just walking around at your apartment, looking so amazing. When did you get out of the hospital?"

"A few days ago," she says.

The two young women show them around the apartment, show them the view from the windows, and tell them all about the University programs they're planning on taking. Georgia says a little about her continuing treatment, but seems content not to talk about it much. Will briefly wishes that Abigail didn't look so distinctive. If Jack ever saw her, he'd never think she was anyone else, even if she dyed her hair some radically different color. Those eyes. She wouldn't be able to go into criminology, because if she distinguished herself Jack would surely see her and know who she was, and then he'd go after her.

Maybe her not being able to go into criminal justice wasn't the world's biggest tragedy.

Hannibal and Will log off and exchange a glance. "They seem to be doing well," Hannibal says.

"They do," Will says. He feels vindicated by their success.

Hannibal rests his chin on a fist. “I killed Abigail in your time. Did I kill the other one, too?”

“I always suspected you did. I’m almost certain,” Will says.

“If you think it, I’m certain you’re correct,” Hannibal says. He pauses for a moment, and laces his fingers with Wills. “How does it make you feel, that I killed these people who were important to you, and you love me now?”

“But you haven’t. And you won’t,” Will says. He’s working overtime to make sure Hannibal doesn’t. “And it didn’t make me stop loving you anyway. It just meant that I loved you and also wanted to kill you. I still kind of want to kill you now, just significantly less than I did in the other timeline.”

Hannibal picks up his iPad and works away at his vacation planning, and then, nearly an hour later, he turns to Will. “Darling, did you seduce me in order to protect people you were worried I might kill?”

Will frowns. It doesn’t matter what the truth is, it matters what Hannibal needs to hear. Will he be hurt if Will says yes? A hurt Hannibal is dangerous. Will might get that scar on his abdomen after all. But maybe Hannibal will respect him for it. Or perhaps Hannibal will figure out all the people Will cares about and kill them for spite, if not now, then at some later point when Will inevitably pisses him off. Indecision wracks him. Fuck.

Hannibal squeezes Will’s hand. “You don’t have to tell me.”

“There were a lot of factors. And those factors don’t have anything to do with what I feel now,” Will finally says.

“I know that. I’m not upset, Will,” Hannibal says.

Will wonders if that’s true. He can never be sure. In his heart, he thinks that Hannibal would never hurt him. Never betray him. Even keep him safe. Will doesn’t even need to sleep in the same room with his dogs anymore because Hannibal is the most vicious thing he knows. But like a pack of dogs, Hannibal isn’t entirely safe. Given the right circumstances, both could hurt the people they loved.

That hadn’t stopped him keeping dogs. It wouldn’t stop him keeping Hannibal. But it scared him sometimes. But then, Will’s pretty sure if he wasn’t afraid of Hannibal, he wouldn’t be half as attracted to him.

Will understands Hannibal, and the more time Hannibal spends with Will, the more Hannibal understands him. And it’s an amazing feeling to be seen and known, but it’s dangerous, too, to have the one person who knows you and understands you be the most dangerous person you know.

Hannibal is looking away, willing to accept that as Will’s answer, but Will feels like a coward, so he finally says, “I wanted to keep you focused on me. Looking at me. So you wouldn’t look at anyone I care about. But it felt really good when you looked at me, and it stopped mattering so much to me what happened to other people. I just wanted you to look at

me and care about me and be with me always in the end. So if I trapped anyone, it was probably me."

"The idea of a scapegoat originates in the Bible. They would take two goats and imbue them with all the sin, malevolence and impurity of the community. One would be sacrificed, and the other would be sent out into the desert—cast away for bearing the sins of others. Do you hate them? These people whose sins you bear."

Will frowns at the aptness of the comparison. His first timeline could be seen as the one where he was sacrificed to rid the world of Hannibal. This second timeline, the one where he is forced to live a life separate from others, on the fringes, cast aside by civilization in an effort to draw away the sins that would harm them. But it doesn't feel right, because he's happier with Hannibal than he ever was in the town full of sinners.

"I hate them," Will whispers, the words tearing out of him like viscera. "I hate them more than you can imagine. But not because they cast me out into the wilderness with you. It's because they lack the vision—the sight—to see you or the world as they really are. To see your beauty."

"And yet you want them to live," Hannibal says.

"I want them to live," Will says.

Hannibal smiles slightly. "If you came back to therapy, we could try to work out why."

"I know why," Will says. He doesn't tell Hannibal, because Hannibal would judge him for it. But the fact of the matter is, he can live with Hannibal and enjoy their sin—revel in it, even—but if he has to sleep on the corpses of his friends he will kill Hannibal one day. This way maybe they can be together without drawing too much blood from each other.

Maybe not. But he has to try.

Part 4: Chapter 20

Hannibal settles into the first-class seat and hands Will the magazine he'd purchased for him while waiting for the flight. Will takes it with a mystified smile. Hannibal isn't sure if it's kindness specifically that confuses him, or if it's kindness from Hannibal. His suspicion is that it's kindness at all. Even before Will had known the real Hannibal, he had been incredibly easy to surprise and even condition with kindness.

Hannibal smiles at the veritable buffet of formative influences and experiences he will be able to feast on during the upcoming trip. Thankfully he has successfully fostered enough dependence that Will feels he needs him along, but Will surely knew that the trip would provide Hannibal with information on Will. Perhaps he thought it was fair game, as he had so much information on Hannibal that Hannibal learning about his father and his childhood wouldn't affect the power balance much.

For once, though, Hannibal doesn't even want to learn about Will to adjust the power balance. He wants to know about the person he loves. He's hungry for everything about him. It's a strange feeling, not unlike the feeling he sometimes gets when he hears a wonderful song by a composer he's unfamiliar with or reads a poem he loves. That rush of wanting to see every painting by a master and fill your soul with them.

Hannibal has been riding high on his love for Will for weeks, though there are inconveniences to having a significant other. Having to consider Will's feelings about Miriam, for instance, is a difficult pill to swallow. And though he welcomed them with open arms and does get a certain amount of enjoyment from them, the dogs need constant attention and care. Plus, he's had less time to create his art—whether that be The Ripper's murderous displays or his compositions on paper or one of his favored instruments.

He has these stray thoughts of frustrations, but then he looks at Will, and it's all worthwhile.

They land in Pensacola, collect their luggage, and walk over to the car rental area. Hannibal handles all the arrangements while Will has a tense conversation with his father about… something.

"Everything alright?" Hannibal asks when they're finally on the road.

Will is fiddling with the GPS, even though he could just use his phone to direct Hannibal. There's something wrong but he refuses to say. "Yeah. My dad wants us to stay at his place. In the trailer park."

"Are you ashamed to show me around a trailer park?" Hannibal asks.

Will rolls his eyes. That's another thing Hannibal is starting to find annoying. Will rolls his eyes at Hannibal a lot. "It's not like I grew up in this particular trailer park. I've never been here before in my life. Just. Say you prepaid at the hotel or something so we don't have to stay. These trailers have like weird spare beds that pull out over top of tables and stuff. I'm not staying there."

“You’re as petulant as a child. Is all this contact with your father regressing you?”

Will sighs. “I dunno, doctor. You tell me.”

They confine their conversation to directions until they get to the trailer. It’s small but well maintained, and the trailers around it look like nice little retirement places, not the den of iniquity Will had led Hannibal to expect.

Will’s father is a handsome, wiry man with white hair, and he looks about sixty. He greets them at the door, extends his hand to Hannibal, and demands he call him Frank.

Hannibal shakes his hand and they all walk in.

“Your taste sure has changed. You never used to go in for the hoity-toity type,” Frank says to his son.

Will grimaces. “Yeah, I’ve never dated a man before either. Things change.”

“Go and get us some catfish from the place around the corner while I get to know your fella,” Frank says.

Will rolls his eyes. It’s less annoying when he’s doing it to someone else. “Catfish doesn’t travel, dad. We don’t need to eat anything yet.”

“I got beer. You go get the catfish,” Frank says as if Will hadn’t spoken.

Will glances at Hannibal. “I’m gonna go get some catfish,” he says.

“Alright,” Hannibal says.

Will steps out of the trailer and the car starts up, then pulls away. Hannibal walks further into the trailer, making note of the way Frank handled Will, not confident the same strategy would work for him but tempted to try at some point just to see what Will would do.

The trailer is fancy but not luxurious, and probably about twenty years old. The counters are green Formica, and the terracotta-colored floor clashes glaringly with it.

“Have a seat,” Frank says. He hands Hannibal a beer.

Hannibal opens it and takes a drink. It’s not to his taste, but it’s hot out, and it’s a beer. “Thank you,” he says.

“What do you do for a living?” Frank asks.

“I was a surgeon, but changed careers and became a psychiatrist,” Hannibal says. He almost winces. There was no reason to mention he used to be a surgeon. He’s trying to impress a boatyard mechanic.

“A psychiatrist?” Frank laughs. “You were his psychiatrist?”

“What makes you say that?”

Frank levels Hannibal a look. “You were his psychiatrist, weren’t you?”

Hannibal nods. “I was. I’d like to know how you came to that conclusion, though. Will doesn’t even like psychiatrists. What makes you think he’d date his own?”

“I know how psychiatrists feel about his mind. They want to study him.”

“I don’t want to study him. I just want to know him,” Hannibal says. “He stopped seeing me as a client and I found myself bereft. I wanted him to know me. To know me in a way a client doesn’t ever know a psychiatrist.”

“So this is serious, then?”

“More than serious. Permanent.”

Frank laughs. “I know I felt like that more than once. Each time it felt like I wanted them forever, and they said the same. But you never really know what’s in someone else’s head.” He smiles grimly, his expression an exact copy of Will’s, and then takes a drink of his beer. “You didn’t object to talking to me alone. You weren’t nervous about what I’d say to you?”

“I’m rarely nervous,” Hannibal says. “Besides, I’ve been looking forward to speaking to you. Not only to find out who might be after Will, but because I want to get to know you.”

Frank frowns. “You’ve got no interest in me as a person. I could tell that right away. But you’ve got a scientific curiosity about me. You want to see the seed that brought your Will into the world.”

“Yes,” Hannibal agrees.

Frank looks surprised at first, and then grins. “What do you want to know about Will?”

Several wonderful stories later, Will returns with bags of catfish and fries. Hannibal isn’t a fan of fried fish, but when he takes off the batter the fish is actually quite good.

Will looks suspiciously between Hannibal and his father as they chat, as if he’s annoyed that they’re getting along so well. Hannibal is intrigued by Frank. He doesn’t have Will’s genius, but he has his empathy. Not to the same extent, but enough that he could read Hannibal—which is no mean feat. Even when Hannibal makes no effort to conceal his feelings, he’s incredibly hard to read. Hannibal hypothesizes that this is part of the reason that Will had been initially drawn to Hannibal, that where people’s emotions usually shouted down his empathy, he found Hannibal’s lack of emoting soothing. He’d likely mistaken Hannibal’s psychopathy for self-control—or convinced himself that that was the case. Hannibal is convinced that Will has been drawn to psychopaths for all his life.

But back to the fact that Frank shares Will’s empathy. It’s extraordinary that such an anomaly could be shared between family members.

It makes Hannibal wonder if Frank at one time had aspirations to be something more than he became, but he didn't have the resiliency and brilliance of Will, so he took comfort in an independent task with his hands. The cleanliness of manual labor. Hannibal could see Will doing the same, if he ever got disgruntled with the work he did now.

Hannibal and Will barely escape sleeping on whatever contraption Frank threatens to 'pull out of the wall for them'. It's late, and Frank refuses to get into the big talk today. He claims confessions are meant for the morning.

They drive to a nicer part of town and check in to the hotel. Hannibal had booked it because it looked bright and airy, and because the room had a balcony overlooking the ocean. Will stands on that balcony for a long time. Hannibal hopes he's admiring the view as the moon rises over the ocean, but he suspects that actually Will is annoyed with him.

Will comes in. "Did you get lots of ammunition against me at my father's when I wasn't there? Find out my fears when I was eight or something?" he asks, crossing his arms.

Hannibal smiles. His prickly darling. "It was less like that and more like when a mother shows the prom date the adorable baby pictures. I just wanted to see another younger version of you, and your father was happy to tell me all about him."

Alarmingly, Will blushes. Hannibal hadn't thought he was capable of such a thing. "When are you going to get bored of me?" he whispers plaintively.

"I seriously doubt I will. You're incredibly interesting, and incredibly malleable. If I ever get bored of you, I'll reshape you as I see fit for my own amusement," Hannibal says. He's joking, but Will seems to take him seriously, and oddly, to take comfort in this.

Will moves closer and Hannibal opens his arms. Will steps in, closing his eyes and Hannibal's arms fit snuggly around his shoulders. Will's head rests against Hannibal's shoulder just so.

Will twitches out of the embrace. "I don't know why my dad won't just tell me about the woman in the photo."

"Perhaps he needs to prepare himself to face your judgment. Or summon the courage to talk about it. Perhaps he wants to extend the visit."

"He's pretty self-contained. He doesn't need me here. And he doesn't manipulate. If he wanted me to stay longer he'd just say it."

"Why are you so upset right now?"

"It's terrible and humid here, and he made me eat catfish even though I didn't want it. And you liked him."

Hannibal frowns. "Was I not supposed to?"

Will shrugs and throws up his hands. "I don't know. I'm not used to you genuinely liking people. You like him."

Hannibal smiles slightly. “Are you jealous?”

“Blindingly. Make it stop, Hannibal. I don’t like being petty.” He paces, and Hannibal watches him. He’s always twitchy, but now he’s like a cat. Suddenly he smiles. “We can visit my dad all we want if we don’t become fugitives. If you just try not to get caught. You’d only ever be caught if I caught you or you purposefully give yourself away.”

Hannibal’s small smile becomes wide. His Will goes from jealousy to manipulation in seconds. Will feels that if Hannibal values his father, Will can use that to control Hannibal’s behavior. He’s not wrong that it’s a factor. If Will is willing to see more of his father, which obviously makes him uncomfortable, as a way to control Hannibal, he must want guarantees that he won’t try to get caught more than Hannibal thought.

“Are you worried you’ll be held responsible for my crimes? The fact that my crimes in Italy predate you by twenty years might make a persuasive argument that I was at fault and you only participated because of my sinister influence,” Hannibal says.

“I know what it’s like for you to be locked up, Hannibal. You think you’ll get the admiration and the fame, and people will still read your damned articles in psychiatric magazines. You think you can just hang around in your memory palace and you’ll be just fine. But I saw you then. All that was true and you weren’t fine. You hated it so much. And you’d never see me again. I’d never see you again. Do you think they’d let us ever see each other, even if they left me free? I don’t want to just see you in my mind and nowhere else. We need to stay free so we can stay together. And if we’re free, we don’t need Miriam.”

“I might need Miriam to stay free, Will. She’s quite happy as she is, I promise you. She doesn’t even know she’s traumatized.”

Will scowls darkly. “You cut off her arm.”

“It was a very civilized and sanitary procedure. She felt no pain. She agreed that it was necessary.”

Will sighs. A long moment passes before changes the subject. “Did you get a sense of what my father’s going to tell us?”

Hannibal grapples with how to articulate what he got from Frank. “It’s something he’s ashamed of.”

Will nods glumly. “Yep. Shame is what I got from him, too. I guess we’ll find out in the morning.”

Chapter 21

The next morning they meet at an IHOP for breakfast. Hannibal is mildly disgruntled that Will didn't just let Hannibal buy some organic fruit and make everyone crepes and fruit salad, which is all they ordered anyway, but Will seems to think that allowing his father to buy them breakfast will calm him in some way.

At any rate, he's finally ready to tell his tale at around eleven that morning. He has a beer in his hand, but Hannibal senses that it's more because he needs to take the edge off of the story than because he's accustomed to drinking in the morning.

"It was in Padre Island off the coast of Texas," he says. "I was working in a marina there. Will, you weren't that old, maybe three or so, and I'd been raising you on my own for over a year. You were a sweet boy, but tough to handle. I knew how to handle you, and the people at that school—well, let's just say we had words. But there was a lady at the marina—she worked in the office—and we fell in with each other. We fell in love."

"I didn't know you ever dated," Will says.

"I didn't, much. Not after this. But Jessica and me, we had something. Maybe not something that wonderful or unique, but we were…we were in it together. She loved you, Will. It was because of you that she…well, she got pregnant. She thought we could make a wonderful family together."

"What happened? Why didn't we all stay together?" Will asks.

Frank sighs. "We did. For a while. I'm surprised you never remembered her. We lived together when the baby was born. We never got married, but we lived together. The baby was a boy we called Derek. He was a sturdy little thing." Frank pauses to take a drink of his beer and finds it empty. Hannibal gets up and brings him another. He takes it, opens it and takes a swig, smiling wanly.

"What happened next?" Hannibal prompts.

"There was an incident at the school. You hadn't even been going too long, just a few months. Junior kindergarten. They said you were…special. Well, I always knew you were special. But they didn't mean it like gifted. They wanted you on medication and they wanted you in a special class. I thought Jessica would feel the same as me, but she had the new baby, then. She wanted you to be easier. She joked that she wished someone would offer her some sedatives. That you were lucky."

"I take it this caused friction," Hannibal says.

"Yes. Friction. I heard about a marina up home in Maine that had a good school right in the neighborhood. I knew they might not have work for long, but it might help you get a good start on your education. Maybe teach me some strategies for how to help you. Up to that

point, I'd just been using my instincts, you know? It had worked out, mostly, but it couldn't hurt to get better."

"And you left her behind?"

Frank takes a drink, then shrugs. "I wasn't leaving. Not for good. Just to get a good start on your education. I was supposed to come back. But Maine is far from Texas, and I wasn't back all that often. I sent money, and Jessica seemed happy with the arrangement."

"But it must have all come to a head somehow," Will says.

Frank nods. "Ayuh. That's so. Should we break for lunch?"

Will stands abruptly, bursting from his chair with such force it teeters but doesn't quite fall over. "Stop it, dad. Stop drawing it out. Stop stalling. You're telling me what you did to my half-brother that was so terrible he wants to frame me for murder, right? So tell it."

Frank raises an eyebrow and turns to Hannibal. "Can't get much past this one, can I?"

"Perhaps if you think of it like tearing off a band-aid," Hannibal suggests.

Frank nods, takes another drink, and then nods again. Will paces around for a minute and then sits back down. Apparently Frank had been waiting for this because he starts talking again. "We went back for a long visit, Will and I. It was supposed to be a trial run, to see how we could all manage as a family if we moved back for good. Will was five by this point, and showing signs not just of sensitivity but of giftedness. Derek was—he was solid. Built like a little tank. Not very kind or affectionate, for a little tyke, or maybe it was unfair to compare him to how Will had been. He was an average little boy."

"And Derek was how old?"

"Just under two. It worked, for a while. The school now had test scores for Will so they couldn't bury him in some slow class and not have to deal with him anymore, so I didn't worry about that. But the problems with Jessica didn't seem to go away."

"She resented Will," Hannibal guesses.

"Boy howdy did she resent Will. She went on and on about how Will wasn't any better than her son, and how he got all my attention and I didn't care about Derek. It never seemed like that to me, like I was choosing one child over the other. Jessica was a good mother. When I was gone, Derek had her. Will only had me. One parent each seemed like treating them the same, not giving one special treatment. And also…" He doesn't finish the thought, but Hannibal assumes he's referring to the fact that he's like Will. That for what it's worth, he shares that strange sensitivity. The empathy. Of course, Jessica wouldn't be able to understand that.

"So this diatribe against Will might have been repeated in Derek's hearing over the course of his childhood," Hannibal puts in.

Frank nods. “I wouldn’t doubt it. And even though we never lived together again, I would go and visit Derek from time to time. I never took you to see them because it drove Jessica crazy to see you. I just claimed I was taking care of something and left you with friends, and I’d go for the weekend. I should have told you, I know, but I didn’t want to have to tell you that you had a brother but you weren’t welcome at his place. I would visit once or twice a year. I always sent money. But it never seemed to satisfy Jessica.”

“What was Derek like?” Will asks.

“He had his moments, I suppose. Most fathers would have been enchanted with him. He liked baseball and flirting with girls—you know, one of those kids who comes back from kindergarten claiming he got married. Basically, he was an okay kid but no one in this room would have known how to say more than hello to him.”

“I guess I can see why he hates me, but so far he doesn’t sound like the kind of kid who would grow up to become a serial killer,” Will says.

“That all changed when he turned thirteen. His mother got serious about a man she was seeing. Not a boatyard rat like me, but a rich fella. He had a yacht, a big house on Padre Island, and another in LA—the whole nine yards. I don’t know what happened, but Derek didn’t want to see me anymore. He cut off all contact. I thought he’d found a better dad.”

“But it didn’t turn out that way,” Will guesses.

“About a year later he called me in tears, asking to come live with us. You were sixteen or seventeen, and you know how you were as a teen. You were withdrawn and irritable and intellectual. We lived in a trailer smaller than this. I didn’t think some kid that had spent the last year in a mansion would feel comfortable with us, and I didn’t want to disrupt your life. It seemed like the slightest little thing could send you spiraling back then.”

Hannibal looks at Will, and Will looks back at him. Now they’re getting to the meat of the story.

“I told him it wouldn’t work right now, but if I managed to get a bigger place I’d call, but I never really tried that hard to get a bigger place. It would have disrupted everything and cost me a lot of money, and I was already sending him quite a bit. I couldn’t imagine how much more expensive it would be to have him with us. He never gave me a reason he needed to come to live with me. Never said things were bad. Just asked me if he could. A year later, his mother and stepfather were dead.”

“What happened?” Will asks.

“It seemed like a murder-suicide. That’s what they ruled that it was, in the end. And Derek was the guy’s heir, so he ended up with a hefty inheritance.”

“What made you think it wasn’t a murder-suicide?” Hannibal asks.

“He told me. He told me he killed them but also that the man had been creeping into his room and assaulting him. He told me this very earnestly, and then the next week he told me that the

guy hadn't done that, but had raped his mom. Then he told me that that hadn't happened either, and he just hadn't liked the guy."

"Did you ever find out the truth?"

Frank nods. "I think so. It was all guesswork. But I found some photographs in his room. You see, you'd gone off to school by this point so I'd gone to LA to help him deal with things. They were moving out of the house and putting it up for sale. He said he wanted me there, but there was an aunt—the stepfather's sister—and he really wanted to live with her. Anyway, there was this box of pictures. And some videotapes. I never saw what was on tapes, but from the photos, I can guess. His mother and stepfather were in some scene. They went to sex parties—classy ones, from the looks of it—but still, orgies. Not my scene, but I can't say it surprised me. Derek walked in while I was looking at the pictures and blew up."

"You think he killed them over sex parties?" Will asks.

"You should have heard the way he was talking about them. Calling his mother a whore, and his stepfather a rapist and corrupter and god knows what else. But the real disgusting language was all for his mother."

Will nods. "A fractured relationship with a mother during or just before puberty is often the cause of pathology that leads to serial killing."

"I don't know if he actually killed anyone else, but he scared me. Somehow I knew the one thing he wasn't lying about was that he'd killed them. But what was I going to do? Tell on him? They'd already ruled the whole thing a murder-suicide and I couldn't just demand they investigate my own son instead. Besides, maybe I thought I didn't have any place to judge. Maybe the stepfather really had done something to him. I just…let it go."

"So there's a man out there a little younger than me who's been killing since he was a child, who was raised to hate me, and who might have virtually unlimited funds?" Will asks incredulously.

Hannibal levels a calm look at Will. The brother doesn't sound all that different from Hannibal, except Hannibal doesn't hate Will, and isn't a dullard. Will must understand what the look means because he deflates suddenly, relaxing against the back of his chair. "Geez, dad. That's quite the story. Have you kept in touch with him?"

Frank rolls his eyes. "I'm terrible at that stuff. I don't even keep in touch with you, and you're my pride and joy. I just never seem to find the words or the time or…I don't know. The habit of affection. It all made more sense when you were under my roof. I enjoy the thought of you, out there, living your life. I don't miss you, but it's not because I don't love you. It's because you're always with me, somehow."

Will smiles slightly. "Maybe we should put Hannibal in charge of the niceties. He's good at that stuff."

"I'd be happy to," Hannibal says, preening.

Will frowns. “Do you know a place where he lived for a long time and what his full name is? Did he change it when his mother married?”

Frank gets up and lumbers over to a basket above the fridge. There are some old cards shoved into envelopes. He rifles through them. “The aunt—Penny, I think—she was good about staying in touch for a while. He was about twenty-four when he moved out, so he lived here for nearly ten years.”

Will snaps a picture of the return address on the envelope.

“And the name?”

“Derek Francis Graham,” Frank says, “Although it’s possible he changed it to his aunt’s last name, or even his mother’s without telling me. He could have easily changed it but continued to sign his name Graham when he wrote to try to manipulate me.”

They spend some time with Frank before starting back to the hotel, but the holiday feel of the previous day has been shattered by Frank’s revelations. Will is thoughtful in the rental car.

“Why now? If he’s always hated me, had money all this time, and he killed for the first time so young, why wait until he’s in his thirties to come after me?” Will asks.

“Something might have changed for him. Perhaps he lost his money. Perhaps he simply read about you in one of Freddy Lounds’ articles. Seeing that you catch killers might have drawn his attention. Perhaps he wants you to look at him, admire him and understand him. It’s what so many of the people you investigate, including myself, want. Or perhaps he’s upset with you for ruining other killers’ fun.”

“If he’s reading Freddy Lounds, then we can use her to get him,” Will says.

Hannibal smiles. “The idea warrants further investigation, but if we conclude that’s how he fixated on you, making use of Freddy is a wonderful plan.”

Will sinks in his seat as they pull into the hotel parking lot. He doesn’t get out of the car right away. “I don’t think a road trip is the best use of our time right now,” he says.

Hannibal nods. “I’ll book our flight home when we get inside. And when we get home, we’ll go find your brother.”

Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

> Sorry for the unplanned hiatus. Will try to get back to a Friday update schedule but it might not quite be that. Will do my best!

Hannibal has lots to do when they get back to Baltimore. He has to get the dogs back from the sitter, inform Will's father that they arrived safely, have groceries delivered, tell his patients he'll be ready to resume appointments in a few days, and prepare dinner.

When the dogs arrive home, Will takes them out for a walk, but even spending time with them doesn't stop him brooding. He's quiet and sullen throughout dinner, and Hannibal can't help but take it personally.

"What's worrying you, love?" Hannibal asks.

Will sighs. "I suppose it's occurred to you that I might have to kill my own brother? I don't… particularly want to."

"Sharing some DNA doesn't make you brothers. You don't know the man. And we might be able to convince him that the two of you have more in common than he knows. Perhaps you might count him as family in truth after we confront him."

Will leans back and crosses his arms. "Yeah? You think that's possible? I don't like the odds. We probably would have been more successful making Matthew Brown our family, you know, if you hadn't killed him."

"Do you think your brother is like you and your father?"

Will squints. "I mean, Dad didn't seem to think so. Described him as aggressively normal. But he must have been something like oversensitive to realize his mother likes to go to sex parties and decide to kill her over it. Most serial killers who have that kind of fractured relationship with their mothers never actually act on their desire to kill her. They kill other women as proxies years later once they develop patterns of thinking and the confidence to do it. The fact that he actually killed her as a child…it's odd. And the different lies he told about why? That's weird. He doesn't seem to fit any pathology I can think of."

"We need access to the files. The files from the mother and stepfather's murder."

"If we get them from the team, we'll have to disclose his name, and possibly his relationship with me. That's going to make get them to close to the truth about my character. Plus, if we eventually meet him and decide we can get along with him after all, he'd be on the run because of us."

“I’ll see if I can get the files through other means,” Hannibal says. “Perhaps he even saw a psychiatrist and I can gain access to his psychiatric record.”

Will nods, but Hannibal can tell he’s still feeling down. He runs a finger gently down the side of Will’s face. “I’d like you to clear up the dishes, and while you do it, clear up every vexing thought in your head.”

“That advice could have come from my last shrink,” Will murmurs, rolling his eyes.

“Then, while I clean the rest of the kitchen, I’d like you to take off all your clothes and have a relaxing bath. I want you to use the sandalwood soap I bought for you, and wash your hair how I instructed you, and then dry yourself and wait for me naked in bed.”

Will is cheered by this and scurries off to follow orders. He does like to be ordered about when he gets mired in his own thoughts, and that suits Hannibal. Hannibal has been able to coddle Will all he wants lately, and this Derek character is undoing all his good work. Will is nearly as fretful and dejected as he was when Hannibal first met him.

As Hannibal cleans the kitchen he thinks about Derek. He would like to spare Will from having to kill his own brother, because he’s not sure exactly what an act like that would do to his darling. But if Hannibal kills Derek instead, it could potentially cause a rift between them. If Hannibal killing Abigail and Georgia in the other place had make it hard for Will picture them together, what would Hannibal killing his actual family do?

In a perfect world, Jack would kill Derek. Then Will would be able to lose the loyalty he felt for Jack despite himself even now. No, in a perfect world Alana would kill Derek so Will would let Hannibal kill her. But something tells Hannibal that, as formidable as Alana is, Jack is probably much handier in a fight. Though if he arranged for Jack and Derek to fight, there’s always the chance they’d actually speak to one another and Jack would end up with some knowledge that would be dangerous for Will. Who knows what Derek knows about Will? Perhaps he knows Will is a killer, if he watched him long enough. Perhaps he even knows about Hannibal.

There’s no easy answer. That makes it a worthy task to prove his worth to Will. He only hopes he manages to find a solution that won’t cost him too much.

He finds Will soft and dry and fragrant between his crimson sheets. He doesn’t ask Will if he feels better now, because he knows he doesn’t. Not yet. It’s Hannibal’s task now to make him feel better. If he’d had the time he would have bathed him himself, but Will often loses patience with him fussing that way.

Fussing in bed, however, is a different matter. Hannibal pulls the sheet down and pushes Will so he’s lying on his belly. He moves willingly, looking at Hannibal the whole time. Hannibal opens the drawer beside the bed and takes massage oil and puts it all over his hands.

Will groans at the sight of it, stretching his arms over his head.

Hannibal straddles Will’s body, then sits lightly on his thighs and runs his oiled hands down Will’s back. Will groans again and kneads his pillow with his hands like a cat.

“Hannibal, you spoil me so much,” Will says.

“It’s my pleasure to spoil you. Do you think you’ll ever take my affection and care as a given? As your due?” he asks, leaning more weight on his hands and forcing some more sounds of pleasure out of Will.

Will turns his head. “If you stop showing me affection and care I’ll kill you,” he says, and mashes his face back into the pillow.

It’s a kind of progress.

After almost ten minutes of massaging Will’s back, Hannibal’s hands roam to Will’s upper arms, and then down his lower back and to his buttocks. Will’s body is perfect—the proportions of a Greek statue and the musculature besides—but his buttocks are really above average. He massages them firmly but without sensuality and Hannibal feels through Will’s skin the moment he gets frustrated with that.

“Fuck me, Hannibal,” he says, turning his head to catch Hannibal’s eye.

“I have a whole night planned, darling. I’m going to lavish you with tender care,” Hannibal claims.

“You’re going to subject me to sexual torture and edge me half to death to try and distract me from worrying,” Will says.

“I’d like to take you apart.”

“You can take me apart if you fuck me. Come on, Hannibal, please?” Will says. He twists his torso and raises up on an elbow so he can give Hannibal the full appeal of his eyes.

Well. How could Hannibal refuse?

They make love twice and talk half the night about anything but Will’s half-brother. By three a.m. they’re in silk robes drinking port and eating cheese on the floor in front of the fire, happy neither of them has to work in the morning. Hannibal can’t keep his hands off of Will. He’d given Will space for almost a week because of the circumstances and tension and it had been very hard for him. Will absorbs every caress and kiss and nuzzle as though he’s starving for it.

Hannibal spares a thought to that other Hannibal who hadn’t been able to touch Will like this.

No wonder he’d killed all of Will’s friends.

“Do you think your Hannibal killed the people you cared about to finally get you alone and touch you like this?” Hannibal asks, caressing Will’s naked thigh.

“He didn’t realize he was in love with me until too late. He’d already done a lot of damage to our relationship by that point. But I guess all along there was an element of pulling pigtails. And I was too stubborn to just let him have me. To just give in to his madness. Our madness.”

“Are we mad, do you think?” Hannibal asks.

Will interlaces their fingers. “This relationship…the way we feel about each other…it’s the craziest I’ve ever felt. The craziest I’ve ever seen us.”

Hannibal frowns. “That can’t be true. I’ve been very sane and reasonable.”

“Yes. We both have been. Measured. Sane. But if someone tried to come between us, Hannibal, I don’t know what we’d do. I can’t fathom it.”

Hannibal’s heart warms at the desperation in Will’s voice. He feels its echo in his own breast. “I’d burn the sky for you.”

Will looks at the floor. “I know. And I feel the same way, which makes us more dangerous than ever.” He looks up at Hannibal coyly. “You know I killed with him. The other version of you. We hunted a serial killer together, and then we killed him, together in the moonlight.”

Hannibal’s body fills with useless rage. He doesn’t have an outlet for it. He can’t kill an alternate version of himself in jealousy, especially since he’s benefited from the courting his alter did, and since he couldn’t get to him even if he wanted to. He can’t even find Will’s half-brother and take his rage out on him because he’s not sure yet what the right course of action is.

He glares at Will. “You love to provoke me, don’t you?”

Will leans back, lying almost flat on the floor, raised up on his elbows. “You can take it out on me, you know. You can hurt me if you want to.”

Hannibal doesn’t believe it. Will is submissive by choice, but he’s not a masochist. Or at least, he wasn’t before his coma. Hannibal tentatively prods at the thought that he might be one now, and how he feels about that.

He strikes like lightening and he’s on top of Will, yanking his head down to the floor by his hair. Will’s pupil’s dilate. Interesting. “Did you want me to hurt you? Is that why you provoke me so?”

“I want to be yours. In every way. Your lover. Your best friend. Your family. Your colleague. Your victim.”

Hannibal feels a frenzy overtake him similar to the one Will had provoked in him the first time he’d asked Hannibal to be inside him. Will can move him like no one else, but now… now he can’t stop himself. He kisses and bites Will, pulling at him and pinching him and letting loose on him. What stops him, finally, is Will coming against his thigh with a shout of pleasure and a flail of arms against his side. Hannibal isn’t even hard, but he feels more at peace than he’s felt in a long time.

His Will.

He leans over Will, hair in his eyes, panting.

Will reaches up and brushes the hair out of his eyes. “My blood is in your mouth, where it belongs.”

“Are you okay? Did I hurt you?”

“I’m okay. If anything gets infected I know a good doctor.”

This prompts Hannibal to give Will a shower and then a thorough examination. He bit him several times, but only once hard enough to make him bleed, and luckily it was on his shoulder, so unlikely to be noticed. The bruises will all be covered by clothing, too. He offers to stitch the bite that’s still bleeding, and Will refuses. Although he doesn’t say it, Hannibal knows he’s hoping it will scar. Hannibal wouldn’t hate that either.

“I’m learning,” Hannibal starts to say as he applies some antibiotic cream to Will’s shoulder.

“What are you learning?” Will asks indulgently.

“I’m learning that I can be myself with you. That you don’t just see me, and know and accept me. You can be with me. Really be with me. You can survive me.”

Will quirks a smile. “Yeah, so far.”

Hannibal puts on the bandage and taps it down carefully, then takes Will’s head in his hands. He stares into his eyes solemnly. “Please stop provoking me darling. I promise I’ll be more… myself. I’ll follow my instincts and hurt you if I feel the need, if that’s the relationship you truly want. But don’t make me lose my mind again. It would kill me if I really hurt you.”

“I promise,” Will says. He runs a hand down Hannibal’s bicep. “Will you promise me something?”

“Of course,” Hannibal says. Ready to promise Will anything.

“Let me decide what we do about my brother. No maneuvering. No manipulation. No nothing. Just me having autonomy over this one thing.”

“Are you sure that’s what you want? There’s no good solution here.”

“Do you promise me or not?” Will asks, scowling.

It doesn’t escape Hannibal’s notice that Will has been manipulating him this entire time. Perhaps Will only gave him the joy of causing pain in order to make Hannibal agree to do as he asked. It only makes him more eager to agree. “Of course, darling. Your half-brother is yours to deal with.”

He only hopes he doesn’t regret his promise.

Chapter 23

Hannibal sends an email to various likely psychiatric clinics in L.A. requesting Derek Graham's file, under various potential aliases, claiming he's a new client. He doesn't do it under his own name, of course. The request is completely untraceable, only exists online, and wouldn't hold up to any kind of scrutiny. However, Hannibal has drafted a hundred such requests legitimately, and it looks so good the files are sent along nearly right away.

He prints the material to show Will later that night, and begins to read through it on his iPad. He doesn't get far—once he realizes that the man is going by Derek Wallace, he stops to Google him and see if he can get any information.

He finds a Facebook page that appears to be the correct man. Derek Wallace is two years younger than Will, went to UCLA for, of all things, accounting, and looks vaguely like Will would if he was blond, grim, and humorless. His eyes aren't as appealing—they're lighter in color and smaller. The face shape is remarkably similar, but he appears taller. He keeps his hair cropped close to his head, so it's impossible to see if it curls.

Hannibal knows that objectively the man is handsome, but he can't help but see him as a perversion of the ideal—like his Will, but wrong. An unfunny parody. A poorly constructed knock-off.

The Facebook profile is public, so Hannibal is able to read everything he's posted. He doesn't post about politics or his work, but he occasionally mentions parties, dates, and noteworthy workouts, which makes him appear to be much as his father described him. He has about three hundred Facebook friends, but, at least publically, he doesn't interact with them much.

According to his employment status, he works at an accounting firm in downtown L.A., but when Hannibal calls the firm to ask to speak to him, he's told that Derek is on a leave of absence for an unspecified amount of time.

Hannibal has a few ideas about how to search for Derek to see if he's staying locally, but he decides to wait for Will to see how he should move forward.

He turns back to the medical file. If Derek murdered his parents as a child, he certainly didn't tell his psychiatrist about it. He was treated for PTSD related to their deaths—apparently he 'found their bodies' and he has reoccurring nightmares about the blood. It's quite possible this is because he feels guilty that he killed them—it would be very Lady Macbeth, but it's not uncommon—but because his psychiatrist didn't know he killed them, he attributes the nightmares to trauma.

When Will gets home, Hannibal explains everything he learned over a glass of wine as he makes Will spätzle and Swedish meatballs.

"I don't get why this guy would come after me," Will says.

“It seems perfectly natural to me. Your absence from his life has set you up as a kind of a taboo figure. Perhaps he’s even been forbidden from contacting you. And then there’s the fact that he’s a killer and you catch killers by understanding them. This sets the two up you up in a rather archetypical, almost doppelgänger nemesis narrative, but at the same time offers the potential of finding a brother who will love him. How could he possibly resist your allure?”

Will takes a sip of wine. “You just think everyone finds me as fascinating as you do. You’re wrong though. Most people find me awkward and off-putting.”

“Their loss,” Hannibal says.

They eat at the dining room table, polishing off two bottles of wine. When Hannibal brings out the desert, a simple vanilla ice cream Hannibal had made that afternoon topped with caramelized pears, he broaches the subject of how they should force a confrontation with Derek.

“I’ve decided what we should do,” Will says.

Hannibal waits for him to continue.

Will smiles at something and continues. “I want to do an interview with Freddie Lounds. I would talk about the murders, and how I’d been targeted for my work but the person trying to frame me was truly inept.”

“Would Uncle Jack approve?”

Will shrugs. “I can talk him around. If he isn’t convinced by me, you can say it’s psychologically sound. Do you think it’s psychologically sound, by the way?”

Hannibal straightens his cutlery. “I suppose so. But I think it will infuriate him, so if your plan is to keep your brother alive, doing this might force a violent confrontation which might end in his death.”

Will takes a final bite of dessert and then pushes his plate away. “Maybe that’s what I want. How else can I test his mettle?”

“What do you want from knowing your brother, Will?” Hannibal asks. Will looks at him closely, but Hannibal doesn’t think he asks out of any kind of jealousy. He doesn’t think anyone, not even a doppelgänger who is just like Will, would be as perfect a match for Will as he is. But if Will had some other killer to act out his violent impulses with? Perhaps he wouldn’t need the kind of trouble Hannibal brings to his life. He didn’t like the idea of Will having another killer to fall back on.

None of this must show on his face, because Will shrugs. “Maybe I just don’t want to be a bad big brother. I didn’t do a very good job of keeping him from harm, did I?”

“You feel guilty for neglecting a boy you didn’t know existed,” Hannibal says.

“You feel guilty for failing to protect a sister in an impossible situation. It’s not much different,” Will says.

Hannibal disregards the comment as he knows at this point he'll never accept what happened to his sister. Never adjust. But it's sweet of Will to try.

Later that night, when Will is asleep, Hannibal leaves to visit Miriam. There are certain maintenance issues he has to keep up with. He has to make sure her conditioning is holding. One of these days he might be in trouble with the law, or really sick of Frederick Chilton, and he'll need to put his plan into motion. It wouldn't do if she failed to identify the person she was meant to identify.

As he goes through the exercises, marveling at his own effectiveness and the malleability of the human brain, he thinks about Will's reaction if he knew Hannibal was with Miriam. He would be upset. Part of Hannibal wants to taunt Will with it, to see what he would do. Would he do something manipulative to try to convince Hannibal of his way of thinking, like the sexual escapades he'd indulged in to get Hannibal's cooperation with his brother? Perhaps they'd have a physical fight. Hannibal's body feels warm all over imagining hurting Will, and being hurt by him in turn. A worthy opponent to struggle against. It has its appeal.

Perhaps now is not the time, however. What if he angers Will to the point where he goes off and takes up with his brother? What if he abandons Hannibal?

Hannibal is immediately annoyed at his insecurity. He shouldn't feel this way. He controls his own environment and the people in it. But usually, he would simply kill Derek Wallace and have nothing to worry about. He promised Will he wouldn't kill Derek, so now he's in suspense about how it will all turn out.

Killing Derek anyway would be a way to provoke Will's violence against him and also control what happens, but it would cause a rift between Will and Hannibal. On the other hand, this other version of Hannibal in the other timeline had killed many people Will loved and managed to inspire his love and reverence. Perhaps killing Derek would only endear him to Will.

It's useless to speculate. Perhaps when he meets Derek he won't want to kill him after all, although in Hannibal's opinion he has a very killable face.

Will wakes up when Hannibal crawls into bed but doesn't ask him where he's been. Trying to keep the peace, or perhaps maintain his alliances for the war with his brother to come. Hannibal lies close and pushes all thoughts of provoking Will to violence against him out of his head. He can't risk this. Not yet.

The next day Will manages to persuade Jack to let him do the interview talking about how he was framed. Jack wants him to talk about how the expertise of the FBI makes them a target for myriad and sundry killers, and maybe even provoke more than just the person who's been setting up Will. Hannibal would be annoyed with Jack for waving Will like a red flag towards bull-like serial killers, if he didn't find him so amusing. When he's annoyed with Jack he simply remembers that he has Miriam Lass ready to go when Jack is feeling confident and secure, or perhaps when he's feeling particularly vulnerable. Hannibal hasn't decided yet. Perhaps when Bella dies he could give the poor man something new to think about. Play matchmaker, as it were, albeit not romantically.

That night Hannibal finds himself remarkably cheery. “Will, it’s time,” he announces over dinner.

Will has the sense to look wary. “Time for what?” he asks.

“A dinner party. Well, not quite yet. We need one more ingredient for my menu,” he says. He smiles broadly.

Will smiles back reluctantly. “You want us to hunt together? Now, while my brother might be watching us?”

“I think between the two of us we can evade a tail. You used to be a policeman, I hear,” Hannibal says.

Will looks thoughtful for a moment and then his expression darkens. “Who would be at this dinner party? Do I have to come?”

Hannibal places a hand on his heart. “My darling, of course you have to come. You’re the guest of honor.”

Will sighs heavily. “I don’t know, Hannibal. You see me one way and the rest of the world sees someone else. What if you bring me in front of your society friends and then you realize I’m just a weird, scruffy teacher who knows more about how to get along with dogs than people?”

Hannibal grabs Will’s hand and holds it tightly. “Will, please. The people I’m going to invite to this dinner party don’t matter. They’re not even people. They’re more like…chess pieces. And you’ve never come to a dinner party where you’ve provided the meat. It’s an illicit pleasure, to know all the hypocritical, self-righteous people are turning into filthy cannibals right in front of your eyes.”

“Don’t you find it rude? A violation? Inhospitable, at the very least,” Will says.

Hannibal shrugs. “I tell them exactly what they’re eating. Listen carefully. I tell them flat out. They’re too comfortable in their civilized little lives to ever imagine a man of my background, who speaks as I do, who dresses as I do, could ever be a monster.”

Will laughs. “Oh, I get it. This is just you being democratic. You’re punishing them for being snobs because you're such a man of the people.”

“Darling, you wound me.”

Will laughs some more, kisses Hannibal, and declares he’s going to take the dogs for a walk. The neighbors have become accustomed to the sight of Will with his crowd of mongrels. One of them asked Hannibal about his new friend and then claimed to the entire neighborhood that Hannibal blushed. He didn’t; it was simply cold outside. But the neighbors, who had previously kept a respectful distance, were now waving with proprietary fondness, as though knowing him when he was single and now, entangled, made them somehow responsible for his happiness. He supposes it’s more likely some of them who had known him for a few years

now, had got a certain itch from him. They found him odd. He'd heard one of them say that he made her skin crawl. No person suit is perfect all the time. Will is so utterly disheveled, so adorably caught up in his dogs, so gloriously human, so sensitive. He doesn't understand that his affection is all the endorsement Hannibal needs to seem real.

"Can I join you?" he asks, rising.

Will looks up from the dog he's patting. "Of course. But wear appropriate footwear. We're going for a walk down the street, not walking a catwalk. I don't want to have to come back before the dogs are ready because your feet hurt."

"Yes dear," Hannibal says, smiling.

Chapter 24

Hannibal watches with pleasure as Will works Freddie. They're very similar, his darling and Miss Lounds. Both are intelligent, manipulative and self-serving. But Will is both more intelligent and has the upper hand. Since he got rid of his encephalitis, traveled through time and back, and had his miraculous and beautiful becoming, Will seems to always have the upper hand.

Hannibal wonders if Will will tire of that. Presumably, the changes he makes to the timeline will one day make life unrecognizable for him.

In the end, Will manages to persuade Freddie to write a story he practically dictates to her. She embellishes with her characteristically florid phrasing, and the article goes live while she's still sitting in Hannibal's living room.

She packs up her laptop and then gestures to the two of them, sitting side by side on the loveseat while Freddie sits opposite on the sofa. "I might have to mention this cozy situation in my next article. Are the two of you romantically involved?"

Will looks at Hannibal, allowing him to field the question as he sees fit. Hannibal debates for a moment before settling on, "We are, and you're welcome to quote me on that."

Freddie looks like she can't decide if she's more creeped out or disgusted, but she nods and makes a note on her notepad. "It explains the vibes," she mutters.

Will looks her straight in the eye, something that used to be rare for him, but he does far more frequently these days. "What vibes are those, exactly?"

"I'm sure you're aware the two of you give off some extremely unsettling vibes," Freddie says, not sounding unsettled in the least. Trying to provoke Will into saying something memorably threatening again, no doubt.

Will just laughs. "I suppose we'd have to be a special kind of unsettling to worry someone who writes fan mail to serial killers for a living."

Freddie purses her lips. "Tattlecrime is a serious publication that gives the public information they need to stay safe. I mean it has to be legitimate, considering the FBI asked me to help out as a way of doing my civic duty, right?"

"Of course," Will says. He rises, and then Freddie follows suit. She nods to Hannibal as she goes by, and Hannibal hears them saying their goodbyes at the door.

Will comes back and walks over to the window, presumably waiting until Freddie has driven off before speaking. Hannibal checks the sofa cushions and the coffee table for bugs—he wouldn't put illegal bugging past Miss Lounds—but finds nothing.

"You think she's still after us?" Will asks.

“She didn’t mention Abigail,” Hannibal says.

Will sighs. “I think it’s fair to imagine the only reason she didn’t is that Abigail has been in touch with her, so she knows Abigail is alive and well. It’ll come back to bite Abigail. Either Freddie’ll reveal where she’s hiding out in a sales slump or she’ll write the damn book and put Abigail back on Jack’s radar.”

Hannibal shrugs minutely. “Who can say if it will? It takes years to finish a book. By the time she publishes her story, Jack might be dead.”

Will laughs. “Yeah, sure. But as soon as she publishes, podcasts and web forums and god knows who else will be asking the question ‘how much did Abigail Hobbs know?’ You should talk to her.”

“I promise I will. But I have other work to do. I’m planning a dinner party, if you recall,” Hannibal says.

Will walks over and kisses him, his face filled with open affection. “Let me know when you need me. You’re in charge of this. I’m your…apprentice. Ready to learn.”

“You’re much more that than. You’re one face and behind it is every killer you’ve ever studied. You’re a master.”

“Okay. But this master is still in awe of you,” Will says. He calls his dogs and takes them out into the yard.

Hannibal recovers from the compliment several minutes later, and finally goes about his business. He finds a name, a William Morris, who he remembers quite clearly as a man who pushed him out of the way at a parking meter on his way into his place of work. Hannibal followed him in and managed to acquire a business card. He has an inkling he remembers something about that particular name making the news, for something that had made him think of Will at the time, so he Googles him. The news is even better than he recalled.

When he tells Will later, Will’s forehead creases in doubt. “You can’t actually have found someone for us to kill who was charged with dog fighting. That’s too perfect, Hannibal. You made this up so I wouldn’t argue.”

“No. He was on my radar because he pushed me once. It just so happens, that out of all my potential victims, our moral codes might converge here.”

“How long ago did he push you?”

Hannibal considers. “I believe it was well over four years ago now.”

“Jesus that’s a clever way to select victims. No one would ever find you if you didn’t go looking to be found. What about the dog fighting charges? Are they recent enough to give me motive in court?”

“Six years ago.”

“You brilliant beast,” Will says, and he shows his appreciation in ways that Hannibal finds quite satisfying.

Afterward, they begin planning. It doesn’t take long. They are both experienced at stalking, so they divide their time between work and getting a sense of their victim’s schedule. He works retail, so his schedule is not as regular as an office worker's, but he does have one routine that is regular enough to make him vulnerable and also infuriate Will.

“How is it even legal? How can they let him in there?” Will fumes.

“A common idiosyncrasy, or perhaps idiocy, of judicial rulings is that they like to make the punishment poetic. So six years ago he was convicted of dog fighting, and the judge ruled he had to volunteer at a dog shelter. Poetic,” Hannibal says.

“But he’s taking pit bulls out the back door and selling them to dog fighting rings!”

“We only know that because we’ve been stalking him,” Hannibal says. “The judge probably congratulates himself on creating a reformed character.”

Will reaches over, grabs Hannibal by the collar and kisses him fiercely.

“What was that for?” Hannibal asks. Will doesn’t answer, but Hannibal knows. Will wants to rid the world of this pest. His Will is vengeful. He is righteous. Not all of Hannibal’s victims will meet Will’s righteous criteria, a fact they both know and likely both worry over to a certain extent. But this one does, and Will is trembling with the desire to kill him.

As they stalk Morris, they wait for Will’s brother to attack, but nothing happens. They do take a lot of care to throw off any tails while they stalk Morris, however, so it’s possible that he simply can’t get a bead on them to attack. Perhaps he doesn’t want to attack. Perhaps he’s working away at a plan to discredit Will. Hannibal wonders if they really have managed to keep him from tailing them. What if they kill Morris and he videotapes it? There would be no need to set Will up in such a case. They are tempting fate by hunting under the implied threat of Will’s brother, and they both know it, but they like to live dangerously, balanced on a knife’s edge.

If Will’s brother somehow manages to use this hunt against them, it would be one victory in a war, and Will would pay him back. It would be glorious.

And if it wasn’t, they could always go on the run.

Finally, they gather enough information on Morris to put a plan in place. He volunteers every weeknight at the dog rescue organization. Part of his routine is to take the trash out while the other volunteer locks up the front door. He usually gets in his car and drives home before the coworker made it to the back door to lock up.

They would wait until he put the trash in the dumpster, chloroform him, and then one of them would drive him off in his car while the other followed. The coworker would assume he went home, and any cameras would see his car drive away in the direction of his apartment.

The plan goes without a hitch, and Hannibal feels a burst of pride in the two of them for how well they work together.

They split up, make sure to do some evasive maneuvers to evade any tails, and then come together again in an abandoned warehouse.

Hannibal carries Morris out of the car and throws him down in the center of the arena, and Will walks over.

“What’s the plan?” Will asks.

“A dogfight, of course,” Hannibal says.

Will looks around the warehouse. “Is this where they hold underground dog fighting? What if there are cameras?”

“I’ve scoped it out, darling. There isn’t.”

“Who’s he fighting?”

“You, of course.”

Will’s slow smile fills Hannibal with pleasure. “You want me to kill him in front of you? In an arena? Like a performance?”

“Like you’re the dog I’ve bet on,” Hannibal says. “I’ve heard putting another, less aggressive animal in an enclosure with a vicious dog is a way to increase the dog’s fighting prowess.”

Will laughs. “It’s one thing to bait me with this guy. It’s another thing to say that out loud.”

Hannibal notices Morris stirring and backs away. Will joins him. Will waits on the sidelines as Hannibal finds the controls on the lights and turns them on. He also turns on the microphone.

“Get up, William Morris. You have a fight to prepare for,” Hannibal says. The sound echoes off the walls with alarming volume, but the place was chosen for dog fighting because it’s isolated. No one will hear the noise or any screams.

Morris rolls over on his side and gags. A reaction to the chloroform, no doubt. He manages to get to his feet. Hannibal sizes up the competition as Will saunters into the ring. Will is slim but wiry with muscle, and shorter than his competition. Morris is around the same age as Will, a few inches taller, and about forty pounds heavier. Morris probably thinks he has the advantage over Will.

“A fight?”

“To the death,” Hannibal says, using the echo effect, even though Will raises his eyebrows so sarcastically that Hannibal can see it from a distance. If it’s not fun, why do it?

“What weapon do I get?” Morris asks.

“You need weapons?” Will snarls. “I don’t.”

Morris looks around the empty arena. “Is this some kind of a joke?”

“This is as much a joke as it is to the dogs you put in this ring. How many of them died? How many of them killed?” Will says. He’s practically frothing at the mouth.

“I don’t watch the fights, man. I just get rid of the garbage dogs. You know there’s dogs no one is ever gonna want—”

His sentence is cut off by Will’s vicious blow to his nose, which explodes in blood. Broken. He raises his hand to his nose and Will punches him in the stomach. He doubles over and Will kicks him in the face.

Hannibal watches with fascination. Despite being bigger, Morris is obviously not a fighter. He only lands a few blows in retaliation for Will’s vicious attack, but this lack of viciousness does nothing to stop Will’s aggression. Morris falls to the ground and Will crawls on top of him, striking him in the face. The blows go on and on, and Hannibal is gratified to see blood splatter Will’s face and a look of sheer joy in his eyes. Eventually, Hannibal enters the ring and pulls a panting Will off Morris.

He can tell Morris is still alive, but Will’s hands will be damaged more than necessary if he continues.

“This dog is too close to death to live,” Hannibal says to Will. “Put it out of its misery.” He holds out a knife.

Will takes it, kneels down, and slits the man’s throat. They both watch with a sense of satisfaction as the man’s blood puddles out on the floor.

Will is drenched in blood. Hannibal takes him to a back room that contains a shower that they probably use to clean the dogs, and he takes off his clothes and showers in a daze. Hannibal examines his hands and sees that he’s split them, which could leave some DNA on the body. Unlikely that they would be able to isolate it with all the victim’s blood everywhere, but Hannibal is not taking any chances. After he harvests what he needs for the dinner party and puts the organs in a waiting cooler, he takes Will’s clothes puts them on top of Morris, then douses them both with gasoline and lights them on fire.

Will walks out, wearing the clothes Hannibal brought for him. “Will that burn hot enough?” he asks, buttoning the cuffs of his white shirt.

“It will when this whole place burns to the ground.”

“I thought I smelled something funny. There’s no dogs on the premises, are there?”

Hannibal’s look is quelling. “Would I really bring you to a place where there are dogs who need a good home? Would I be that short-sighted?”

“You love my dogs,” Will says.

They go out to the car. Hannibal stows the cooler in the truck and hands Will a switch, and then starts driving away. “Ignite it when we get to the road,” he says.

They can see the warehouse go up in flames as a variety of set charges go off. As they drive Will starts laughing. “You just had to use that echo effect, didn’t you? I thought I was going to laugh out loud.”

Hannibal chuckles. “Did you have fun?”

Will lays back against the seat of his chair. “Way too much fun. You?”

“It was perfect.”

Hannibal had never imagined he could have such a perfect companion. No one would ever take Will from him.

No one.

Part 5: Chapter 25

Will sinks deeper into pillow top mattress, pulling the comforter over his head. Hannibal had not only had his porn-style ceiling mirror removed, but he'd redecorated in soft, comfortable fabrics and muted colors just for Will, so he and Will had moved back to the master bedroom. Will loved it, but hadn't said a word about it to Hannibal. He doesn't want Hannibal to know he's happy and satisfied, after all.

Will's muscles are still sore from killing William Morris, but he feels good. Hannibal had taken him apart, put him back together again, and gave him a massage besides.

He sighs. He supposes he can pull himself together enough to seem like a functional human being during a dinner party if the compensation is Hannibal treating him like a god. Or a beloved pet. But really, a beloved pet is sort of treated like a god when you think about it, aren't they?

"Darling, are you still in bed?" Hannibal asks.

"Hmmm," Will says.

The mattress shifts as Hannibal sits down, and Will feels the warmth of Hannibal's hand on his back. "Are you going into work today?"

Will stretches and turns over, looking at Hannibal, who is fully dressed and coiffed. "Do I have to?"

"Certainly not. The Earth and everything on it is at your command." Hannibal brushes the hair back from Will's forehead.

Will sighs. "That's overstating it slightly, wouldn't you say?"

"Haven't I kept my promises to you, darling? Do you doubt that I can deliver the world to you?"

Will just resists the urge to tell Hannibal to calm his tits, crazy pants. It's hard to accept Hannibal's adoration, sometimes. To take his melodramatic proclamations seriously. It helps, of course, that he knows Hannibal means every word, but sometimes he has to bring himself back down to a reasonable orbit.

"I should go into work. See what they're working on at the lab."

Hannibal clucks his tongue. "You're a glutton for punishment."

"Don't worry, I won't forget to come back in time to dress for dinner."

Hannibal pecks him chastely on the lips. "Don't worry about that if you get caught up. You could never look anything less than beautiful, no matter what you wear. Just remember to be

here for appetizers at seven."

Will narrows his eyes. He doesn't believe it for a minute. He hadn't been poked and prodded by Hannibal's sadistic tailor only to wear some shabby corduroy coat to the dinner party Hannibal is throwing in his honor. He knows Hannibal better than that.

"I'll be back by five-thirty at the latest," he says.

Hannibal rises. "It's probably better for you to go in today. I wouldn't want you underfoot with the caterers."

Will swears they already had this conversation, but that time it was about Will's dogs. It had been fun at the time, but roleplaying Hannibal's vicious dog in a dog fighting ring might actually give Will a complex in the end. He manages not to grumble much as he gets up, showers, and dresses, and he sees how serious Hannibal was about getting him out of the house when he's greeted at the bottom of the stairs with a packed lunch, breakfast, and a thermos of coffee.

"Wow, what are you actually doing when I leave?" Will asks.

"I'm just excited for you to see me as a host," Hannibal says. "Seeing the behind-the-scenes inner workings of my dinner party methods might make it seem less impressive. I'd rather captivate you along with the rest of the guests."

Will frowns. He supposes that's just possible. "Is anyone from work coming?"

"I'm afraid not," Hannibal says. "Space was at a premium and no one but Jack made the cut. Jack declined his invite but he knows about the party so will not send you off on a serial killer hunt without notice." He pauses, and then frowns himself, asking, "Have you been to one of my dinner parties before? In the other place?"

Will shakes his head. "I always managed to avoid the big dinner parties. You cooked for me and a few others a couple of times, but nothing with caterers and fancy dress."

"Good," Hannibal says fiercely.

Will is still chuckling on the ride to work.

He gets to the lab ten minutes too late to be considered on time. He's not going to score highly on any performance reviews, so why bother being on time?

Beverly sees the little lunch pail Hannibal sent Will with and grabs him and pulls him into a staff area and demands he share.

Will lays out the breakfast and finds there's enough for both of them.

Beverly smirks and takes a pastry. "Well, things certainly have changed between you and Hannibal. I seem to remember you cutting all ties with him a few months ago, and now the two of you are pretty darn cozy. Moving in together, hosting dinner parties…what the hell changed?"

Will considers as he pours coffee into the two mugs Beverly has laid out. “Why are you suddenly so curious about my social life?”

“I’ve always been curious. I can just never get you alone these days,” Beverly says.

Will smiles. It would be nice to confide in someone, even if he couldn’t tell the whole truth. “When I was sick, I needed Hannibal a whole lot. I depended on him, too. I was unstable, and he was such a solid support system. He kind of became my whole world. I realized I had feelings for him, but he was my doctor and I knew how pathetic that was.”

“Was it really pathetic, though? I mean he looks at you like you’re the only steak left in the world.”

Will almost dies at her choice of metaphor, but manages not to laugh too long or too loud. “He didn’t have any feelings for me—romantic ones—back then. He was my therapist. Hannibal is a consummate professional. If I would have told him how I felt he would have referred me to someone else. I felt so much better when I wasn’t sick I didn’t need another therapist but I knew I had to stop depending so heavily on Hannibal. Get some perspective. Date other people to get him out of my head.”

Beverly shoots him a doubtful look. “Is Dr. Du Maurier really all that different from Hannibal though?”

Will narrowly avoids choking on his pastry. “Um, whatever. They’re not even the same gender.”

Beverly nods. “So you took some time off from Hannibal and what, realized you still loved him?”

“No, that’s not really what happened. I cut ties with Hannibal, like you said, and he missed me. He considered me a client and a friend, and he had no idea it went any deeper. But then he missed me enough it made him realize he was actually, ya know…”

“Madly in love with you,” Beverly finishes with an eye roll.

Will points a croissant at her. “Yeah, that. And so he started to try and get my attention.”

“And this charm offensive worked and here you are,” Beverly says.

“Here we are,” Will agrees.

“Well, I’m glad the two of you crazy kids can make it work,” Beverly says.

Before Will can even overreact to that one, Price appears in the doorway. “What the hell? I brought you a cupcake, Will, and this is how you repay me? I don’t even rate a mug of Dr. Lecter’s notoriously good coffee?”

“You can share whatever he sent me for lunch, if you want,” Will says to keep the peace.

“Okay. But the three of us really shouldn’t mention any of this to Zeller,” Price says.

They bring Will into the lab and he does his thing, pointing the way to a few clues they hadn't figured out themselves. He shares lunch with Price, who he always forgets is hilarious, and then looks at some more pictures of cases the others had stalled on when he was away.

"What we really need to do is concentrate on one case and solve it," Price says. "We let cases build up and we're dividing our focus. But now that you've scaled back your involvement with the office, it's tempting to look at everything all at once because you're here today."

"Well, what would you say is the most urgent case? Is there one where you think the killer is going to attack victims faster or more viciously than any other?" Will asks.

Zeller looks up from a body. "That's actually a great question. I think it's this guy in Tennessee."

Price nods. "You're probably right. Maybe we should head out there."

"I can't travel right now. Dinner party," Will says. He also doesn't want to leave when there's the possibility that his brother will attack. He wants to be able to meet him on his home turf and he definitely wants to meet him with Hannibal present. He isn't sure he trusts Hannibal with his brother, but he doesn't want to meet his brother without Hannibal. What if Will finds himself in his own situation where he feels inconvenient compassion for someone? He doesn't want to die over meeting a brother he never knew.

Price frowns. "Well, I'll see what Jack says. He's pretty distracted these days. His wife's in the hospital. Usually he directs us, but he pretty much told us to figure it out."

Will raises an eyebrow. "You can skype me from Tennessee."

Price purses his lips. "Will, none of us want to go to Tennessee. You know that, right?"

"I just have a lot of obligations right now. Term papers and such," Will says. He realizes he never prioritized teaching before. Partially it was because Jack was shouting in his ear to make sure he did whatever Jack wanted, but also he was drawn to murder. He followed the blood like a hound. Now, he's satiated. Hannibal keeps him satisfied in more ways than one.

He agrees to take the case files from Tennessee home to see what he thinks, but he leaves the office in time to have plenty of time to have a shower and dress.

When he gets back to Hannibal's place, it's a flurry of excitement. Hannibal waves to him as he goes upstairs—an almost unheard-of level of neglect since they started dating. Will isn't upset. He finds the lack of attention a little sweet. If it was every night it might be different, but one night? It's fine.

Will scrubs and moisturizes as he's been instructed to by Hannibal, using the products Hannibal picked out for him and claimed would be optimal for him. He puts serum in his hair, shaves, and uses the aftershave and cologne Hannibal likes. He's tempted for a moment to deliberately annoy Hannibal with that cologne with the ship on the bottle, but he decides to stay on his best behavior for just this one night.

He dresses in the suit Hannibal had had made for him, a modern take on a tux Will couldn't begin to describe, and puts on his shoes. He looks in the mirror and sees a man he doesn't recognize staring back at him. The suit is a bit much, but Hannibal claims black tie is not the most formal option. Will had watched Downton Abbey so he's aware Hannibal isn't just bullshiting. He walks downstairs. Hannibal is cooking frantically when he looks up and sees Will.

He stops everything. "Look at you," he says.

Will gestures to his clothes. "You like?"

"You look perfect," Hannibal says.

Will can tell he wants to come over and greet Will properly, but he goes back to the food. Will pauses on his way to the sitting room. "Can I help with anything?"

"Relax and have a drink, my dear. We'll be finished cooking soon and I'll come and join you."

Will does as he's told. It takes a while for Hannibal to finish, but within the hour, he comes out and Will makes and hands him a drink.

Hannibal's suit is white tie, and looks immaculate. His every hair is in place, and his shoes shine brightly. He takes the drink and downs it thirstily, which is Will's only indication he might be feeling anything less than cool confidence.

Will has never seen him like this. "Are you nervous for your friends to meet me?" he asks.

"Dinner parties like this are a lot of work. And for this particular party, I didn't want to spend too much time in the kitchen, because I didn't want you to think I'd abandoned you. I had to make some changes to the menu so the caterers would be able to heat up the dishes effectively and I would be able to spend less time in the kitchen and more time with you and our guests."

"Thanks, hon," Will says without thinking.

Hannibal smiles smugly, and Will realizes he's used an endearment without realizing it. Hannibal reaches for him and pulls him close, their lips almost touching when the doorbell rings.

"Ah," Hannibal says, pulling back. "Our guests have arrived."

Will sighs and braces himself for a night of social activity.

Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will tries to remember to smile. Someone told him once he's more approachable when he smiles, and he wants all of Hannibal's horrible friends to like him.

He realizes about half an hour into the appetizer course that they'll never like him. They all, at the minimum, want to bang Hannibal, and those who don't want to bang him want to marry the guy. Hannibal holds court like a god, and they flutter around him casting worshipful gazes. Will wishes he could see them witness Hannibal's inevitable fall from grace, but Hannibal's right. It's even more delicious than the food, to watch them vie for his attention while he makes them cannibals.

When he realizes that he'll never inspire anything but their jealousy, Will feels liberated. He stops worrying about how he's acting and just enjoys the food, the irony, and the schadenfreude.

There are fifteen guests, all told, not including the catering staff and Will and Hannibal. There are several domineering old ladies and their silent, glowering husbands, a middle-aged woman escorted by a much younger, muscle-bound man, whose appearance had caused a mild scandal when they walked in together. There's a middle-aged woman and her daughter, a beauty who glares daggers at Will and who has apparently set her cap at Hannibal, of all people. There are two psychiatrists from out-of-town Will knows vaguely by reputation, both male, and a third, furtive-looking fellow Hannibal describes as a collector. Hannibal introduces the next two men as former colleagues from his surgeon days, and then finally, fashionably late, two gorgeous artists, one male, one…to be determined…dressed to the nines.

Some of the people Will recognizes from the papers. Some he recognizes from the reading of victim-impact statements in court during the timeline where Hannibal's crimes were revealed. Will realizes that there are about ten people here Hannibal has cooked for dozens of times, some might refer to them as his dear friends, and the rest are people Hannibal has never met at all. Will guesses the repeat guests must either be the people Hannibal cares about the most or the people he reviles the most in the world—or both.

Will wonders if the ones who haven't met Hannibal know his reputation as a psychiatrist or a dinner party host—or if they're just social climbers. The collector, at least, has corresponded with Hannibal about…whatever he sells or collects. Will is vague on the details.

"I thought you were introducing me to only your dearest friends?" Will murmurs.

Hannibal raises an eyebrow. "A stranger can be your dearest friend for the duration of a good meal."

Will watches Hannibal as he takes a sip of wine. He's looking extremely handsome and almost happy, tonight. He draws Will into his witty conversations as much as he can, and Will, as usual, has no problem keeping up with him. Hannibal has a covetous hand somewhere on Will at all times, and, when he's finally forced to go into the kitchen to deal with something, it's the first thing one of the old crones points out.

"He can't keep his hands off you, can he, dear?" she asks. She eyes Will skeptically down her nose. "I've never seen him act this way about anyone."

Will laughs lightly. "He's just worried I'll escape into a quiet corner if he lets go of my arm. He's going to be really surprised if I don't sneak out before dinner."

A dangerous gleam lights up in the eye of Jessica, the woman's daughter. "Oh? You don't like entertaining? I would think the partner of someone like Hannibal would need to be skilled in that area."

Will smiles blandly. "Why should I be, when he does all this so well?"

"I'm not sure if you know all the social obligations of dating a count," Jessica continues.

"I'm quite sure you don't," Hannibal says shortly.

He had walked up behind Jessica as she spoke, and his words drop like an anvil into the middle of the circle. The guests look at each other, alarmed.

Will feels his eyes widen, and for perhaps the first time in his life, he makes an effort to cover for someone else socially. He laughs winningly. "I think being deposed nobility has to be pretty easy though, right? Especially in a democracy-loving country like America. I mean it probably helps that most Americans couldn't find Lithuania on a map."

Hannibal gestures with his wine glass. "Many Americans like the exotic, and nothing appears more exotic in America than being set apart by one's birth."

Will nearly rolls his eyes, but the rich assholes he's standing with are nodding. They all think they got where they are through merit and hard work.

Will watches Hannibal serve dinner with the bemused smile of someone watching the theatre of the absurd. The fact that these people buy into Hannibal's bullshit—the fact that they lap it, actually—brings humanity down a few notches in Will's estimation. All Hannibal has to do is dress up in a fancy suit, dress up viscera in some colorful ways, and they think he's a hero. It's ridiculous. Nevertheless, he can't take his eyes off him.

"How did you two meet?" a portly woman asks after loudly exclaiming the liver she ate—a human liver—was the best thing she'd ever tasted.

"Through work," Will says.

"Oh, are you also a psychiatrist?" she asks.

Hannibal interjects. "He profiles serial killers for the FBI."

One of the psychiatrists chimes in. “You do a bit more than that, don’t you? You put yourself in the place of the killer. Extreme empathy. That must leave you in quite a terrible headspace.”

Jessica leans forward eagerly. “I’m fascinated by serial killers. Have you met any famous serial killers?”

Will nods. “All part of the job,” he says.

One of the psychiatrists chimes in again. “What do you think, Will, about the phenomenon of charming young women like this one being fascinated by killers, horror movies, and gruesome murders? It does seem to be rather a common thing, doesn’t it?”

Poor Jessica is taking hit after hit, but she seems to take this one on the chin as she sips her wine and waits for his answer.

He takes a moment to consider. Even lets the pendulum swing. Finally he says, “Women have lived in fear since the dawn of time. I think perhaps watching true crime shows and reading about killers is almost like self-care, like a lesson. Keeping oneself informed on all the ways the world can kill you. When they feel scared, they get a rush of adrenaline but also the heightened fear response that can be the difference between life and death in a dangerous situation. Invoking that fear response must make them feel just a little bit safer, paradoxically.”

Jessica puts her wine down. “Wow,” she says.

Will glances at Hannibal, worried he might be stealing his thunder—a dangerous proposition. But Hannibal is looking at him like Hannibal looks at him. But like, in front of people. Will can’t help but feel a bit embarrassed by it.

Hannibal eventually says, “I think it’s a way of gloating. The person reads Tattlecrime.com and thinks to themselves, ‘I would never be such a fool’, I would never put myself in that position. It’s a way to simulate safety by taking the part of a potential victim who sees the danger coming and gets away.”

“Will’s right,” the husband of one of Hannibal’s old lady friends—Will forgets his name—says. “It has to be what Will said. Otherwise, how do you explain women who fall in love with serial killers in prison? They don’t understand why they feel safety and comfort when they think of the killer, and they confuse it with love.”

His wife raises a haughty brow. “You forget that every woman thinks the abusive man won’t hit me. I can reform the drug addict. It’ll be different when the baby comes. He’ll want to kill me like he does his other victims, but he won’t be able to, because he loves me too much.”

Will feels his interest in the conversation wane for some reason and turns to the people on the other side of him, who’re talking about their favorite pastimes. The young man who came on the arm of the middle-aged woman casts a friendly smile Will’s way. “How do you unwind after a hard day of hunting serial killers?”

“I like fishing,” Will says.

The man groans. “I hated fishing growing up. My dad would take me out on the boat and I’d just be stuck there baking like a ham. It was awful.”

“I don’t really fish from boats much. I do fly fishing.”

This leads to several people exclaiming about the romance of fly fishing, a view Will had definitely shared until Hannibal replaced his flies with parts of corpses.

One of the men starts talking about his boat and Will admits that he’s a good sailor, but probably knows more about boat repair than the kind of yacht the fellow owns.

Hannibal leaves to work his magic on the dessert course, and Will is confronted by the collector.

“I heard what you do for a living. How did you get into that?” he asks.

“I used to be a cop,” Will says.

“Yeah, but not all cops start profiling serial killers for the FBI when they leave the profession,” the collector says.

“What is it you collect again?” Will asks.

The man actually looks nervous. “You know. This and that. I acquire rare items for my clients.”

Will looks around. “Like the kind of decor a man like Hannibal would buy?”

The man shrugs slightly, and Will frowns. What the hell is up with this guy? But he’s distracted by one of the matrons asking Will if he plans on putting his mark on the place now that he’s moved in.

Will laughs in self-deprecation. “Usually when I put my mark on a place’s décor the ‘mark’ in question is motor oil and dog hair. I think I’ll leave the decorating and the dinner parties to Hannibal.”

They have something that tastes strongly of booze and chocolate for dessert, with coffee, and then they all say goodbye. Hannibal waves goodbye and soaks up the general acclaim as he sees them out.

“You were magnificent,” Hannibal says. “I didn’t expect you to make an effort with them. But actually, it seemed quite effortless.”

Will laughs. “The second I knew they all hated me for landing you, I realized I couldn’t say anything to make them like me. It’s quite liberating to know you can’t earn someone’s good opinion.”

“By the end of the night, you earned many of our guests’ good opinions. I believe Jessica, in particular, was quite taken with you.”

Will shrugs. “It’s easy to impress the young.”

“Yes, it’s much harder to impress someone at my advanced age. I have to say, it did impress me that your brother managed to find a way to join us tonight.”

Will blinks. “Wait, what? How can he have been here? I saw the pictures of him. He wasn’t here.”

“He dyed his hair and styled it quite differently, and he was wearing color contacts. The clothing he was wearing was also quite different than that he wore in the pictures we saw of him on the internet. But it was definitely him. As an artist and an anatomist, it was really quite obvious.”

Four of the guests would have been around the right age and weren’t people Hannibal knew. The collector, the younger lover, and either one of the psychiatrists. Will tries to superimpose his memory of what his brother looked like in the picture on top of his memory of the four men, and comes up blank.

“Shit,” he says. “I was a cop. I should be able to see through disguises.”

“You were distracted,” Hannibal says. He opens his iPad and scrolls through for a moment. “Jessica is quite beautiful. Here’s a picture of your brother, to jog your memory.”

Will is torn. Should he maintain he wasn’t staring at the beautiful girl, or just admit it? He didn’t care for her one way or the other, although maybe Hannibal had a point. She *was* the only guest whose name he’d bothered to learn. But would Hannibal kill her out of jealousy or spite? Would he be more likely to kill her if Will begged him not to? Was Hannibal only mentioning her because he wanted to have some kind of nasty threesome with her?

“You’re exhausting,” Will says as he takes the iPad. He scrolls through the pictures, and finally finds one that makes him sure he knows which dinner guest was his brother. “Okay, yeah. I see it now.”

Chapter End Notes

Mini-game: which one of the party guests is Will's brother?

Chapter 27

He's dyed his blond curls dark brown, straightened them, and parted his shorter hair on the side, but the younger lothario with the older woman is definitely Derek.

"Huh," Will says.

"You find that surprising?"

Will shrugs. "He just didn't seem all that hell-bent on vengeance, is all."

Hannibal puts his hands on Will's shoulders. "Did any of my other dinner guests seem like more likely revenge killers?"

"Jessica seemed like she could be pushed, if she wanted something badly enough. And that collector—what was his deal? If he wasn't out to get me, why was he acting like he was?"

Hannibal chuckles and walks to the sideboard to replenish his drink. "He procures illegal things for people. I think I was looking at him the exact moment he realized you used to be a police officer. It made him nervous."

"He really needs a better poker face to be a successful smuggler. What does he deal in, anyway?"

Hannibal sips his drink. "Exotic pets. Large cats, usually, although he can get all sorts of things."

"Please tell me you'd never buy a tiger," Will begs.

Hannibal laughs lightly. "My dear, I'd never get a tiger as a pet, I assure you."

"Good," Will says. He frowns. "Wait, are you saying you'd get a tiger for some other reason?"

Hannibal's eyes dance. "You never know."

"Are the caterers still here?"

"I think they're just finishing up. I'll go send them away. Have a drink, and we'll discuss our plans before bed."

Will does as he's told, and in short order Hannibal returns. "How do you think Derek managed to get into your exclusive dinner party? One of those psychiatrist guys said he'd been waiting for an invite for two years."

"His date, Margery Grey, is a dear friend of mine. I think he cultivated the relationship in order to watch you. Living with Ms. Grey is certainly a step up from living in an abandoned mountainside cabin."

“Watch me? But I don’t even know her,” Will says.

Hannibal laughs. “She’s our neighbor, darling. She doesn’t have a dog to walk so you’ve probably never met her, but she lives opposite us and two doors down.”

“Do you think she’s in any danger from him?”

Hannibal nods. “His killings so far have been a mixture of hatred and utility. I think he must hate wealthy people because they remind him of his stepfather. Nevertheless, he’s able to mix socially with them without arousing any suspicion that he’s not one of them.”

“So he just moves to town and is able to convince some woman to let him move in with her?” Will asks.

“He seems charming, harmless, he has enough of his own money she knows he’s not after her fortune, and his good looks certainly wouldn’t bother her any.”

“His good looks? Good looks? You find him handsome?” Will asks. Suddenly the idea of killing his own brother doesn’t seem that farfetched.

“Only because he looks like you. I doubt you can say it was my resemblance to Jessica which drew your eye all evening.”

“You of all people can’t fault me for admiring beauty,” Will says.

“As long as you only admire it from afar,” Hannibal says.

“Okay, now we know where Derek is. What now?”

“I suggest you offer to take your little brother fishing.”

“He said he hated fishing. Do you think my father took him?”

Hannibal shakes his head. “Your father wouldn’t have had access to a boat as an out-of-town visitor. He must have been talking about his stepfather. Remember your father said he had a yacht.”

Will nods. “So I just say, come fishing with me, it’s different without a boat, and then we go off alone to the woods somewhere and hash it out? Sounds dangerous.”

“You won’t go without me,” Hannibal says. “I can sketch and eat a picnic. We’ve done similar outings before. I can invite Margery to make it seem less odd.”

“You know her too well. If things go wrong and we have to kill her, or she dies by accident, suspicion will fall on us. We can’t invite her. Let’s just say it’s a men’s trip.”

Hannibal shudders. “Sounds utterly juvenile.”

“But it will serve our purpose,” Will says.

Hannibal agrees, and the next day they put the plan into action. Derek, who is calling himself David Browning, agrees to the trip immediately, without even mentioning his dislike of fishing. Will isn't sure if he's eager to get to know Will or trying to get him alone and kill him.

They had agreed to meet at the park entrance, which saves them all from an awkward car ride. The best fishing spot is about a mile from the parking lot. Hannibal is giving his backpack cooler a final perusal and Will is making sure all the fishing gear is stowed in his backpack correctly when Derek drives up.

He gets out of the car and eyes Hannibal suspiciously. "I didn't realize we were bringing dates. I would have brought Margery if I knew."

"Don't worry about me," Hannibal says. "I'm just along for the hike and to provide lunch. The two of you won't even notice me."

Hannibal even keeps his distance on the hike. He claims to have a bad knee, though he doesn't, and he refuses to give the cooler up to the much younger member of their party, "David", who isn't carrying anything. He insists the others walk ahead and he'll amble along at his own pace.

When Hannibal is out of sight, Derek speaks up as they walk through the well-worn trail. "Are you really so crazy you can't go anywhere without bringing your fussy old psychiatrist?"

Hannibal's fussiness is actually amazing camouflage. Will and Hannibal had discussed the fact that since Derek had been staying with Margery, he likely hadn't been following them, but had just kept an eye on them through the window of her house, and his impression of Hannibal seemed to confirm this view.

Will smiles. "He's my partner, not my psychiatrist."

Derek huffs. "I can't believe with all the fascinating people you must meet through your work you end up with that guy. Jesus."

Will outright laughs at this. "He *is* a fascinating person I met through work."

"Yeah right. You're telling me you'd be with the guy if he was poor?"

Hannibal must have been right about his hatred of the rich. And since he killed his mother, too, he must equally hate people who marry for money.

"The money comes with a lot of bullshit I'm not interested in. Like all that society shit. I could care less about it. I make an okay wage and don't spend a lot," Will pauses, then continues. "I'm not saying I'd rather Hannibal be poor—even the whiniest rich person has to admit money solves more problems than it causes—but like, there was a moment the other day when I didn't feel like getting out of bed and going to work, and Hannibal was like, so don't. You never have to work another day if you don't want to. And that's liberating—I mean of course it is—but in a way it's kind of demoralizing."

“Yes!” Derek exclaims. “I say shit about rich people, but I inherited a bunch of money when I was pretty young. It just made me lazy and unambitious. Even if I did work hard and make even more money, all people would say is that anyone could make money if they were born with it. But I wasn’t born with it, so it just feels—I don’t know. I’m being one of those whiney rich people you were talking about.”

“You could give away your money, but take it from someone who knows. Poverty ain’t all it’s cracked up to be. I mean I worked my way through night school as a cop, became an FBI agent, which yeah, there’s a certain prestige to it, but it’s a civil servant job and the wage reflects it. I’m a self-made man by any metric you use, but I don’t think I’ve ever really met anyone who gave any sign they respected me for it. You work and suffer to improve yourself but you’re like a new sewage system.”

Derek laughs. “What?”

“Like if you put a new sewage system on your house. It improves the property value, makes everything cleaner and safer, gives you piece of mind—but you spent all this money and the only changes happen underground where no one sees it. No one can tell how hard you worked to get your qualifications compared to the other professor who started out rich and partied through school.”

“Does Dr. Lecter see you as a sewage system?”

Will stops walking and looks Derek in the eye. “Dr. Lecter sees me as better than I am. Better than anyone has ever seen me. And that’s worth everything. He knows me inside and out and loves me anyway. If he lost all his money, got old, got sick—none of that would make a difference to me. He sees me.”

For some reason that makes Derek scowl. He walks ahead of Will. Soon they emerge from the woods and get their gear out. Will brought extra gear for Derek to use, and he’s explaining how to cast and reel when Hannibal finally makes it out of the woods. He looks rosy-cheeked and healthy in his weird European outdoors on the estate ensemble. Looks like he’s a member of the shooting party at Downton Abbey.

Derek is sulky with Hannibal when they exchange a few words, and then happier when he and Will don their hip waders and wander into the stream. By lunch, he’s positively glowing—happy enough that he seems to almost warm up to Hannibal. He even compliments Hannibal on the sketch he made of the two of them fishing, begging to be allowed to keep it.

Will catches a fish or two and Derek claims to have had one on the line, and they part at the parking lot once more. Will and Hannibal are silent on the drive home. Will isn’t sure what’s going on with Hannibal, and he’s worried that Derek will never like Hannibal and vice versa. How can Will be a good brother to Derek if he wants to kill Hannibal? And it seems like, inexplicably, Derek wants Will to be a brother to him. But Will can’t give Hannibal up, either.

When they get home Hannibal fries up the fish with rice on the side, and they sit down to eat.

“I don’t understand Derek,” Will says, “But I think I like him.”

“He certainly likes you,” Hannibal says. He takes a careful sip of wine and replaces his glass.

“Why did he set me up then? He framed me for murder. What the hell was the point of that if he likes me so much?”

“He wants you. Badly. And all to himself. He didn’t set you up because he wanted you to be arrested. He set you up because wanted to separate you from your friends, cost you your job, and isolate you.”

Will nods. “And then he swoops in and says hey, I’m your long-lost brother. I believe that you’re innocent. I can save you. I have lots of money—”

“—probably criminal connections—” Hannibal cuts in.

“He gets me to flee with him on a false passport, we go off somewhere and my passport goes astray. Now I depend on him completely,” Will finishes.

“He has your full attention. Your gifts can see him. He’s got the brother he always wanted, and maybe more—who knows how deeply he’s convinced himself he cares for you—and he’s sure he can convince you to be the way he is. Kill the way he does. All of us who kill and admire you think we’ll convince you,” Hannibal says.

“You did,” Will whispers.

Hannibal grimaces. “If we hadn’t been together—if I hadn’t been able to give you an alibi—it might have happened that way.”

“I wouldn’t have gone to him. I would have gone to you,” Will says, "Even if we weren't together. Even if I hated you. I've always wanted to run away with you. I would have gone to you."

“Would you?” Hannibal asks, picking up his wine. He sniffs it, then replaces it on the table without drinking. “I’m not so sure. I’m not sure you wouldn’t rather be with him than me. After all, he’s never hurt you the way I have, but he can offer you everything I can.”

Will chuckles. “Are you serious? First of all, no matter how weird his feelings for me are, I’m never going to want to fuck my brother. And he’s—he’s—” He’s not you. He doesn’t treasure beauty, even when it comes from horror. He doesn’t think I’m beautiful; he thinks I’m a mirror. He’s not a monster who loves me. He’s a sicko who covets me. But Will doesn’t know how to say any of that out loud, and isn’t sure it would reassure Hannibal anyway.

Hannibal starts clearing the table. “I’ll let you think up more reasons you’d rather be with me than him while I start dessert.”

Will stops him with a hand on his arm. “Hannibal, no. I would never choose him over you. Never. For a million reasons. I just. You know I’m not good at saying this stuff.”

“You’re an extremely articulate person, Will.”

“Not always!”

Hannibal smiles reluctantly. “What will you do about Derek?”

Will shrugs. “I don’t know. I don’t see a solution.”

Hannibal puts the plates down. “Will, you can’t afford to dither about this. Setting you up so far hasn’t worked, and I was the one that ruined it by giving you an alibi. The next person he’s going to try to take away from you is me. He needs you alone and vulnerable, and he wants you more than ever now that he's had a taste of spending time with you. If he didn’t already have a plan to kill me, he will after I horned in on your fishing trip today. He doesn’t want any competition for your focus and attention. And despite my promise not to hurt him I’m not going to let him kill me.”

“I wouldn’t ask you to,” Will says.

“So you’d be okay with me killing him in self-defense?”

Will crosses his arms and looks at the floor. “I never said that.”

“If you don’t make a decision, Will, he’ll make it for you. And you might not like the results,” Hannibal says. He picks up the plates and leaves the room.

Will sits heavily in his chair and wishes he could see the solution.

Chapter 28

Will wakes and descends the stairs to find Hannibal rummaging through their mutual possessions. “What are you doing?” he asks.

“A man bent on our destruction was in our house, probably unsupervised for quite some time,” Hannibal says. “I was occupied with the guests and dinner preparations, and you were unaware of who he was, so weren’t watching him closely.” His voice doesn’t sound tense, however, but rather something like satisfied. He does like a challenge.

“Oh shit. You’re right. How can I help?”

“Make a decision. This situation is only going to get tenser.”

“But you like that. I think I should be more worried about you enjoying the game and falling in love with my brother.”

“All the more reason to resolve this quickly,” Hannibal says.

Will rolls his eyes. “You’re just trying to spur me into action, aren’t you?”

Hannibal stands and shrugs. “Perhaps.”

Will isn’t worried. Much. “Have you found anything yet?”

“Not yet. If Jack and the team show up, we’ll know that they’ve been tipped off and there’s something here.”

“What about my house?”

Hannibal frowns. “It’s entirely possible, but everyone knows you’re not living there right now. It would be easy to convince the authorities any evidence they find was planted.”

“Especially since they know someone already tried to set me up.”

Hannibal smiles. “Actually, you could probably commit a sloppy murder and leave DNA evidence all over it at the moment and it would be assumed it was just part of the setup.”

“Yeah, but we probably shouldn’t test that theory.”

“What are your plans this afternoon?” Will pauses, and Hannibal sighs. “Tell Derek hello, darling. And remember who you are, and what you need in life. Remember how good we are together,” Hannibal says.

“There’s no danger of me running off with my brother, Hannibal,” Will says. “I just want to be a part of his life. Are you telling me if your sister was alive you’d let me kill her without any recriminations?”

“Of course not,” Hannibal says. He puts his hands on Will’s shoulders and kisses him lightly. “I’m just…I’m not used to worrying, and I know this situation is dangerous for us. I trust you.”

Will isn’t so sure. It’s true; he worries that Hannibal will take matters into his own hands and convince Will it was the right thing later. Hannibal knows how to manipulate minds and make people see things from his perspective, and Will knows he’s more vulnerable to that sort of manipulation than most. It will be safer for everyone if Will finds a solution fast, before one of the more unreasonable people involved decides to solve the dilemma.

Will picks up Derek and drives him and the dogs to the property in Wolf Trap. They’re going to walk along the fields and enjoy the outdoors. Will is surprised Hannibal let him go off with Derek alone, but Will didn’t exactly disclose the fact that they were going somewhere secluded. Now Hannibal doesn’t suspect Derek wants to hurt Will anymore, but Will himself isn’t so sure. He’s armed with a knife, because he knows how obsession can change to a desire to kill.

Derek chatters happily in the car, soaking up Will’s attention for most of the drive. When they’re near the house, he asks about Will’s career, asking questions that Will thinks would have clued him in to there being something suspect about the man even if he didn’t know his identity, although he might be fooling himself. Will only indulges Derek’s questions as much as he would indulge anyone’s, but Derek doesn’t seem particularly frustrated by Will’s evasion.

When they start their walk, Will starts to suspect why.

“I get that you can’t tell me specifics about your job, but I’d love to know more about how it makes you feel,” Derek says.

“Are you thinking of a change in careers?”

Derek shakes his head. “I don’t mean being an agent. I mean, being close to murders. Close to death. I know how surviving something awful can traumatize you. My parents died when I was young—a violent death. How do you feel being close to murderers, and talking to them? It must be fascinating.”

“It’s hard,” Will says.

Derek makes a sound of frustration. “You can tell me things, Will. I don’t…Shit.”

“What is it?”

Derek stops walking and crosses his arms, hunching in on himself. “I know you’re going to find this crazy and weird. You’re going to be freaked out. But it’s a coincidence, I swear.”

“What are you talking about?” Will asks softly.

“I realized at that dinner party that you could be…I know you don’t know anything about me, but I swear it’s true. You’re my brother.”

Will swears. He hates that this situation is forcing him to try to be a convincing actor. But he knows how to let his empathy do most of the work. “I don’t have a brother,” he says, his face a study in blankness.

“You do. You can ask your father. All of our parents agreed that it would be better to just separate our families. I didn’t even know you existed until I was almost a man.”

That wasn’t the impression Will’s dad had given him. Someone’s lying, but Will isn’t sure who. “How did you find out?”

“My real dad—our dad—came to visit me sometimes. One day when I was about fourteen, he just—let it slip. He mentioned your name, and then had to explain who you were. I thought for sure he’d say that you were like a little kid so of course he wouldn’t bother to take you along when he visited. A two-year-old would just take all his attention and it would be kinder not to involve him in our limited bonding time and leave him with a sitter. But no. You were older. You would have been my best friend, but they all just decided not to let us know each other.”

Will has to admit he believes Derek on this one. It would justify his father’s exaggerated sense of shame. He maybe was a part of creating the rage that made Derek a killer. It also explains Derek’s obsession with Will. He had built Will up in his mind as the one thing that would have made him happy and complete as an unhappy, lonely child.

Irreverently, Will says, “Are you sure that’s not just the plot of parent trap?”

Derek laughs. “I wish it was that sweet. But it’s a story about you and me, so it’s not sweet at all. There are things I want to tell you. I need you to know what I’ve been through, but it feels too soon for that. You probably don’t believe me anyway. Your snobby count boyfriend probably doesn’t think I’m good enough to be in your life, anyway.”

Will frowns. “Hannibal isn’t a snob. At least not the way you’re thinking.”

“So he does think I’m not good enough to be in your life?”

“Hannibal doesn’t have an opinion on you. He’s happy I’m making a friend in the neighborhood instead of just hanging out with people from work,” Will says. "I'm sure once he knows you're my brother he'll want to get to know you better."

“Does he have a problem with your work?” Derek asks.

“David, I think you’ve—”

“It’s Derek.”

Will smiles. It’s nice not to have to keep that straight. “Okay, Derek. I think you’ve got the wrong idea about Hannibal. He’s a good man. He helps people. He’s got a deep understanding of abnormal psychology. He’s one of the few people in the world who understands what drives a killer as well as—” he stops.

“As well as you do?” Derek finishes, with a sly grin.

“I can’t just take your word on this. You get that, right? I’m going to have to contact my dad.”

“I’ll tell you all the particulars you’ll need. But just so you know my real name, it’s Derek Francis Graham. That’s the name dad knows me by, anyway.”

The drive home is subdued; even the dogs are quiet after their run. Derek tells Will the information he’ll need to check up on him on the drive. It makes for a dry conversation, especially since Will already knows most of it. Finally, they’re back in Baltimore and they say their goodbyes.

Hannibal is cooking when Will walks in.

“How did it go?” he asks.

“He told me who he is. I’m supposed to look him up and confirm his story.”

“And then the two of you will be bonded brothers, I assume,” Hannibal says.

“I thought being snarky was my job,” Will replies. He sighs and tells Hannibal why he thinks Derek is so obsessed with him, then says, “I think he wants us to bond a bit more, and then he’s going to tell me the truth about the people he’s killed.”

“And you’ll be entranced by him like you are those other killers,” Hannibal muses.

Will shrugs. “I guess so. Or maybe he’s going to find a way to get me out of the country, then tell me he’s a killer.”

Hannibal finishes plating the food and picks it up. “I think his plan now is to frame you for murder by killing me. Follow me to the dining room, my dear.”

Will does as he’s told. Hannibal explains the dish and then they tuck in. It’s delicious. Probably the most delicious food Will’s ever eaten. He looks at Hannibal incredulously. “How is this so good?”

“I had to up my game. Wouldn’t want you losing interest in me.”

Will frowns. “I’ve had it up to here with you being insecure. What the hell? Who are you? Bring back the Hannibal I know and love. The one who wins at any cost.”

“I’m sorry. I’m not enjoying becoming this person, either. Hamstrung and pathetic.”

“I’d hardly call you that.”

“I’m on your leash. Unable to kill the people I need to to protect the two of us.”

Will scowls. “If you’re pathetic in any way it’s because you think the only way to triumph over someone is to kill them. Since when are you so small-minded?”

Hannibal actually smiles at this. “Probably since the moment I agreed to the condition. Since I promised you I wouldn’t hurt him hurting him is all I can think about.”

“You know the remedy to that. If you want to hurt someone I love, you know what to do,” Will says.

“You want me to hurt you?”

Will nods. “If that’s what you need to do to feel good about me.”

Hannibal looks conflicted. “I’m not sure I like the thought of you being willing to be hurt to save your brother from me. You can’t be that committed to him already, can you?”

Will feels almost shy. Scared of himself. His smile feels brittle. “I think it’s more that I’m that committed to making you happy, my love.”

Hannibal looks energized. Avid. “I know something that will make you happy, my darling. I know you want me to give you a scar. I’ve been thinking about that, and I have an idea.”

Will suddenly feels shaky. He’s scared and, if he’s honest, a little turned on. But the memories of being disemboweled are stronger than the arousal. A lot stronger. “What do you have in mind?”

“Trust me,” Hannibal says. He smiles with teeth, and Will isn’t sure he’s ever seen Hannibal look so sinister. Even with a power saw to Will’s head he at least had the decency to look sad about it. Now he just looks gleeful.

They’ve finished eating and they leave the dishes on the table. Hannibal holds out a hand and leads him into the living room. There’s a fire going, and it looks deceptively cozy. Hannibal gestures for Will to sit down and walks over to a desk, opening the drawer and taking a long thin object out and putting one end in the fire.

“What do you know about branding, my darling?” Hannibal asks.

Will lets out of breath of relief that’s almost orgasmic. He hadn’t realized he’d been holding it. Hadn’t realized he was terrified. Branding he could stand. Branding might even be wonderful.

Hannibal continues as though he hadn’t asked a question. “Branding was a common punishment in colonial America. For instance, a robber might be left with the mark R on his chest for ‘robber’. But before that, it was most commonly used to identify property. Cattle, slaves, and other chattels.”

“Am I your property, Hannibal?” Will asks in a voice that’s more coyer than he’d ever admit.

“Do you want to be?”

“Yes,” Will says eagerly. “What does the brand say?”

“It’s the snake from my family crest. Would you like that on your chest, darling?”

Will's cock throbs. "Yes please," he says breathlessly.

Hannibal squints at him. "Are you aroused, darling?"

"Kiss me," Will demands.

Hannibal does, and it turns into a whole lot more than a kiss before they're through. Will is sensitive and gasping when Hannibal pulls away and goes over to the fire and takes out the brand. "Take off your shirt," he says.

Will does as he's told, double-quick. He thinks he sees Hannibal laugh at his eagerness. He can't summon any shame about it.

"Can I see it?" Will asks.

"You'll see it on your chest for the rest of your life," Hannibal says. "Lie down."

Will lies down on the sofa, breathing hard. He closes his eyes, and feels a gentle hand on his shoulder. Hannibal is holding him down the way he likes. Will feels an almost incomprehensible sense of peace and calm, and then a hot searing pain that feels…amazing. He sinks deeper. Hannibal holds the brand to his chest for a few moments more, and then withdraws it. Will is surprised there's no flesh clinging to the brand. He remembers suddenly that in the other timeline Mason Verger branded Hannibal.

He hopes it wasn't quite as erotic as this experience had been.

"Thank you," Will says, still panting.

Hannibal puts the brand safely on the cement and comes back to Will, enfolding him in his arms. He trails a finger down the side of Will's face. "You're beautiful, my love."

Will smiles. Everything feels perfect. For now.

Chapter 29

Will takes a break from both Hannibal and Derek the next day. He goes into work, which he and never before considered particularly restful, but it seems like a respite at the moment. The team makes some progress, and there's some indication they might need to jet off to the Midwest soon if Jack manages to convince the local PD for an invitation to an interesting case.

Will had enjoyed the day so much he puts off going home by asking Beverly out for drinks. Hannibal claims to have patient notes to write and advises Will to eat with her if he'd like.

"So what's the deal, Will?" Beverly asks as she steals one of his nachos. The bar she chose is noisy and trendy, and Will feels completely out of place—or he had, before he'd downed the first beer. Now he's starting to feel quite at home.

Will frowns. "What are you talking about?"

"I can't think of one other time you've asked me out to drinks, Will. You're either avoiding Hannibal now that you live together, but since you're ridiculously happy, I doubt that's the case, or you have a problem you don't feel comfortable talking with him about."

"He knows what the problem is, he just doesn't agree with the way I'm handling it," Will says.

"So you're fighting?" Beverly asks.

Will sighs. "Not really. He says he trusts me to handle it. He's just worried that something bad is going to happen to come between us."

"That guy really loves you."

"I know, believe me," Will says.

"Okay, tell me what the problem is, and I'll tell you the solution," Beverly says.

Will tries to think of a way to explain the situation without saying my long-lost brother and my boyfriend are both serial killers who want me all to themselves and want to kill each other, and I want them to just be friends. He settles on saying, "I can't tell you without betraying several confidences. But I guess the best way to explain it is that no one did anything wrong, but two people I care about in completely different ways are making demands on my time that are utterly incompatible with each other."

Beverly takes a swig of beer. "Well, that's easy. Just choose the one who you love the best and give them what they want." She bursts into gales of laughter. Will probably shouldn't let her drive after this.

Will rolls his eyes.

Beverly leans in. “No, but in all seriousness, why would Hannibal have a problem with this? He’s a psychiatrist. Shouldn’t he have some workbook for you to fill out to handle situations like this?”

“Physician, heal thyself?” Will mutters. “He has his ideas about what the right move is. I just can’t agree.”

“Will, you love Hannibal. You have to trust him. He only wants what’s best for you.”

“But he doesn’t want what’s best for the other person involved.”

Beverly holds up her drink. “Compromise. You have to find a way to make Hannibal get his way while also making the other person get their way. At least partially.”

“So don’t let Hannibal completely win, but don’t let him lose either,” Will says. He’s not sure how to do it yet, but a kernel of an idea is forming. A seedling of a plan. “Beverly, I think you’ve really helped me.”

“Wait, really?” she asks. “Cool! Let’s order more beer.”

They order more beer.

By the time Will leaves the restaurant, he needs to call Hannibal to get a ride home, while Beverly takes an Uber.

“You and Beverly get along quite well, don’t you?” Hannibal asks.

Will suddenly feels quite sober, but now believes that even if Hannibal gets jealous of Beverly he can keep Hannibal from killing her. “She has a way of cutting through all my prickliness and liking me anyway. Not many people do. Why?”

“Because your brother was watching you with her. Perhaps he won’t decide to kill me. Perhaps he’ll decide to kill her.”

Will’s heart thumps wildly. Will tries to convince himself that Hannibal is just making this up to convince Will to act, but he can’t even work himself up to believe it. Will spent all that time purposefully distancing himself from Beverly to protect her from Hannibal only to leave her vulnerable to an attack from Derek. Will shakes his head. “But it still makes more sense for him to come for you.”

“Are you certain? Are you willing to bet her life on it?”

“Fuck,” Will says. “Fuck, fuck, fuck.”

“Beverly already got in her Uber, but I know where she lives. We can wait for her at her house and make sure he’s not going to do anything to her,” Hannibal says.

“No,” Will says, shaking his head. “I’ve got a better idea. I’m fairly drunk. Probably not much of a match for Derek. Can you handle him alone?”

Hannibal scoffs. “Of course.”

Will doesn’t want to express any doubts, but Derek is pretty built. And they don’t actually know how dangerous he is. They don’t know if he’s been killing people left and right, or if he only killed his parents and the people in Wolf Trap. However, Hannibal’s self-confidence is not misplaced. The only person who came close to being a match for him in terms of physical violence was Jack, and he’d always been able to triumph. The Red Dragon had been a challenge for the two of them but there’s no way Derek is as much of a threat as the Red Dragon.

“I’m going to call him and tell him to come to the house. He’s so obsessed with me he’s sure to come running, right? I’ll claim to need him urgently. I’ll let him in the house, and you jump him. Take him down. But don’t kill him. Just contain him. Tie him up. I’m thinking about an idea of how to handle everything but I can’t really talk about it yet. I’m too drunk right now to articulate it.”

Hannibal nods. “I can do that.”

“Good.”

When they get home, Will calls Derek. “Hey, can you come over? I really need to see you right now.”

“It’s pretty late,” Derek says. “Are you sure you need me right now?”

“Something really bad happened between me and Hannibal and I really need my brother right now,” Will says.

“You talked to your dad?”

Will makes an affirmative noise. “His story didn’t exactly match yours which isn’t doing much for my state of mind. I’m so mad at my father right now. And then Hannibal chimed in and said some awful things about our family and I—” Will chokes back a sob.

Derek interjects. “Don’t say it over the phone. I’ll be there in twenty minutes, okay?”

“Thanks,” Will says. He disconnects the call.

“Masterful,” Hannibal says.

Will gets a coffee and tries to sober up. He texts Beverly, who says she had fun and that she made it home safe. Will hopes his brother is already on his way to Hannibal’s place and she’s safe, but it’s out of his control now. If Derek killed Beverly it would make solving the situation between them a whole lot easier, but Will isn’t sure how he would mentally deal with her loss. Not that they were really all that close, but it would put a lot of things into question for him. Will had convinced himself to be with Hannibal as a way to protect Beverly and Abigail and everyone else caught in the crossfire of their battle, but if Beverly died anyway it would start to seem like fate—like nothing Will did could change anything. He doesn’t think he could give Hannibal up at this point either way, but the way he coped with

the changes Hannibal had caused in him—his ways of justifying his new self—would collapse. Will knows some of the things he does and thinks are completely insane, but he's able to function in society nevertheless. If he lost his sense that his insanity served a purpose, he might also lose his grip.

Will eats something quick and drinks his coffee, hoping that will make him alert enough to do what he has to do. Soon after, there's a knock on the door. Will and Hannibal exchange a glance, and then Hannibal turns off the kitchen light and melts into the darkness.

Will opens the door. Derek doesn't look like he's fresh from a murder; Will hopes if that was Derek's intent he interrupted him in time. "Come in," Will says.

"What happened? You sounded panicked on the phone."

"I confirmed what you said about being my brother yesterday. I told Hannibal and he was just really quiet about it. I went out with my friend and had a few beers, and when I came back he was…he wasn't who I thought he was," Will says.

Derek's eyes gleam with suppressed glee. "He didn't want me in your life?"

"It wasn't about you. He just said some things about American families and how trashy we are. How my family was like a soap opera and he wasn't sure he could associate his with mine. And like, oh yeah, for sure. Nobility is super normal and respectable, Hannibal. There are no stories about nobility misbehaving at all, is there?" he asks sarcastically.

"I mean, none of that sounds like the end of the world," Derek says cautiously.

"I just didn't think he was like that. And then we fought, and I didn't think I was like that. The things I said. I was vicious," Will whispers.

"Hannibal will either forgive you and get over our little family drama, or he won't. Some relationships don't work out. Family is what's important, and you have me now. I'll never betray you or take you for granted. I promise you that, Will," Derek says. "Is he here now?"

"No," Will says, "He's at his office for the night."

"I can stay. Or if you want, we can get your things together and we can—well, we can't go to Margery's because I'm a guest and I'm sure she'd just take Hannibal's side, she's weirdly obsessed with the guy—but we can go back to Wolf Trap. You're not stuck here with him."

Will can't help but wonder why Hannibal isn't doing anything. He could have come out and smacked Derek on the head at any point but he's just standing in the darkened kitchen, presumably listening. But Hannibal chooses that moment to emerge from the shadows, and like the contrarian he is, he doesn't use his advantage and sneak up behind Derek, but rather clears his throat to get his attention.

"That won't be necessary," Hannibal says.

Derek's head whips around. "You said he was—"

“Will lied to you,” Hannibal says. He tilts his head in a way that makes him seem more animal than man. “Tell me. How does that make you feel?”

Derek makes a fist and takes a swing, and Hannibal dodges backward, then gracefully moves to flank Derek from behind. He throws an arm around Derek’s neck, and appears to be about to put him in a headlock when Derek twists out of his grip and pushes him away.

“Who the hell are you people?” he gasps. “What the hell is going on in this house?”

“Derek, I can explain,” Will says.

Derek pauses and looks at Will, and in that moment of inattention, Hannibal swiftly injects Derek with a hypodermic needle. He catches Derek around the waist and assists his collapse to the floor, being careful about his head.

“How was that?” Hannibal asks, looking up at Will. His hair isn’t even mussed.

“Masterful,” Will echoes breathlessly. But then because he’s Will Graham he has to add, “I don’t know why you just didn’t come up behind him and inject him. You’re always so dramatic. But I can’t argue with the result.”

“It would hardly be sporting to just sneak up behind him. I believe in fair play,” Hannibal says.

Will’s forehead creases. “Do you?”

Hannibal ignores the question and stands. “What do you want to be done with him? I have room in the basement for a variety of methods of imprisonment, but that would have to be short term. What exactly do you want him incapacitated for? Are we going to ship him off to a foreign country with no ID or passport and see if he can make it back?”

Will is somehow not surprised that an idea like that is just lurking in the back of Hannibal’s mind. Perhaps he’s been wracking his brain for a solution, too.

He shakes his head. “I’ve almost got everything worked out. We need to tie him up, and then I’ll explain everything.”

Hannibal crouches back down and takes hold of Derek by his armpits. “You grab his feet.”

They manage to maneuver him down to the trapdoor, and then Hannibal puts him in various psychiatric restraints that’ll probably give Will nightmares while Will looks on and tries to be helpful. They pick him up and put him in a wheelchair, then fasten the safety belts so he can sit upright while still unconscious.

Hannibal turns to Will. “Well, I’ve done exactly as you asked. Now, explain your plan, darling.”

Chapter 30

Will looks over at his brother. He looks soft and vulnerable trussed up in the psychiatric restraints, but Will isn't fooled. Derek is a danger to Will and Hannibal, and their lives together. He tried to take away Will's ability to stay in his job and his freedom to live the way he wanted. He probably wanted to separate Hannibal and Will. This needs to happen.

"Well?" Hannibal asks.

"I want you to make him safe for us. Use whatever methods you want. Psychiatry, conditioning, psychic driving, whatever, as long as he's still alive in the end. I want you to make him see that we can be brothers without him ruining my current life or killing you. Show him that there's space in my life for him but he doesn't need all of me."

Hannibal stands up straighter. "You're intrusting his psychiatric care to me? You know my normal method of treating someone like him would be to get him to embrace his dark side and murder whoever stands in his way."

"So you'll have to think outside the box. I'm sure you can do it," Will says.

Hannibal nods thoughtfully. "And how will you explain where he went to Margery?"

Will shrugs. "I won't. He was using a false name. Let her look for him. She'll find he doesn't really exist, and it'll make him seem like a con artist at best or potentially someone even more dangerous. His disappearance, under those circumstances, won't seem so mysterious anymore. If you manage to get him on track and able to spend time with us eventually, we can tell her a version of the truth—that he wanted to get to know his brother and went about it a weird way, by approaching me with a false name."

Hannibal steps closer to Will. "I honestly can't believe this is the solution you came up with. It never even occurred to me because you felt so violated when I attempted to change you, and you have such a problem with me holding Miriam Lass."

"My bitterness about my experiences as your patient is in the past. And as for Miriam Lass, she's innocent. She's only a danger to you because of her hard work and intelligence. She's not a killer. I feel guilty that my happiness is at her expense. Derek, on the other hand, needs to be dealt with. For all I know he's already killed Beverly. I couldn't just let him hurt her, or you."

"I'm flattered that you think I'm capable of changing your brother's ingrained behaviors. I'll do everything in my power to make this right for you," Hannibal says.

"Am I asking too much of you?"

Hannibal smiles slightly. "You've given me a professional challenge, and you've trusted me with your brother. I know how important he is to you. I couldn't be happier with your decision. Even if you'd told me I could kill him, I'd hesitate because I know that could come

between us in the end if you second-guessed yourself and blamed me for his death. This—this is a much better solution. You're wonderful and I'm happy to play my part."

"And you won't realize he's better than me and fall in love with him, right?" Will says, stepping closer and putting his forearms on Hannibal's shoulders.

"My fear that you'll connect with your brother at my expense is completely reasonable, but I'm not sure where your fear that I'll do the same at yours is coming from. He hasn't interested me in the least until this moment," Hannibal says.

"But now you're interested," Will says. "And he didn't even have to be changed to be a killer. He's been a killer since he was a kid. He's my brother—he might be more empathetic than we think. He could have the same condition as me and my father but just be better at dealing with it. You might think he's the better Graham if you spend enough time with him."

"Will, first of all, your brother doesn't have your empathy. I could tell there was something different about you from the moment I spoke to you. Your father took me a little longer, but it was definitely apparent. If I conceivably missed the same quality in your brother, your father would have noticed it when Derek was young. Second of all, you fascinated me because of the combination of empathy and encephalitis, but that wasn't what made me want to be your friend and eventually made me fall in love with you. Our conversations—your intellect and your appreciation of beauty—those things aren't genetic. You are you, and you are the most unique and interesting man I've ever met. No one, no matter who they are or how connected they are to their dark, animalistic side, could ever replace you. I've met many killers over the years and none of them but you has ever made me feel less alone. I will never give you up, and I will never replace you." Hannibal pecks Will chastely on the lips. "Besides, falling in love with a patient sounds wildly unethical. Not like me at all."

"Oh yes, you're the epitome of ethical, aren't you?" Will murmurs, turning the kiss less chaste and pulling Hannibal closer.

The kiss stops when they hear a muffled, indignant noise from the wheelchair.

Derek is struggling against his bonds. Hannibal looks at Will. "Shall I leave you alone to talk to your brother?"

"I think I'd rather do this with you," Will says. "But could you take the mask off so he can answer my questions?"

Hannibal nods and does as Will asked. When the mask is off, Derek's head leans as far from Hannibal's hands as possible and says, "What the hell is going on in this house? Who the fuck are you people?"

Will grabs a chair and drags it over to Derek's wheelchair, and then sits down. "Are you okay? Do you need a glass of water?"

"Fuck you!" Derek said. "I came here to find a brother, and I found a damned psycho. What the hell?"

“If you’d just approached me like a normal person, I probably wouldn’t have you tied up in a wheelchair right now. But you chose to frame me for murder, and in a kind of inept way. Let’s just say I’ve been framed for murder by better men than you.”

Derek protests and disagrees for a long time, and Hannibal loses patience and leaves, coming back with a glass of wine for Will and some water for Derek, who gulps it down. Will relaxes and sips the wine. Eventually, Derek gets tired or exasperated and indicates that he’s ready to talk.

“What was the plan? Why did you frame me for the murders? Were you trying to get my attention?” Will asks.

Derek huffs. “I wanted you to notice me, for once. And I wanted you to stop working for the FBI. You’re better than that. You don’t have to be a fucking…civil servant. You can be with me! I have enough money to keep you from having to lower yourself that way.”

“And what does being with you mean?” Hannibal asks.

Derek glares. “It means that all the influences that are making Will this conventional person will fall away and he’ll realize who he is.”

Hannibal crosses his arms. “Will is hardly conventional.”

Derek rolls his eyes. “I know that now. How was I to know a gay FBI agent who fell in love with his psychiatrist would be the kind of person to shrug off being framed for murder and tie me to a chair?”

“So you were trying to convince me that I could use your resources and let loose, do what I wanted, kill who I wanted…by framing me for murder,” Will says.

“I didn’t think you’d be so opened-minded about murder. How was I supposed to know?”

Hannibal hums thoughtfully. “You could have watched Will and I more closely. If you’d seen the things we’d done during the time when you were in town, you would have been left in no doubt that you could fit into our little family.”

Derek makes a sound not unlike a growl. “I’m not part of your family! You’re a privileged, rich asshole who doesn’t know the meaning of struggle.”

“Hannibal certainly has the ability to project that background. But in spite of being actual nobility, he’s had a rougher life than me. Certainly a rougher life than you. His trauma is genuine and…extensive. And even if he was a privileged little prince who’d never had a harsh word spoken against him, he’s the man I love, and if you really care about me as a person and not just a…a…possession, then you should accept the person who makes me happy,” Will says.

“That’s something we’ll have to work through in our future sessions,” Hannibal says.

A look of horror passes over Derek’s face. “What the hell? Are you tying me to a chair to force me to get therapy?”

Will shrugs. “I know it’s a bit weird, but honestly if someone had done it earlier your parents might still be alive.”

Derek expresses his feelings about that for a while, loudly, and Will shakes his head. He’s pretty sure Derek’s mostly upset about the idea of therapy in general, and has no idea what he’s in for. Will is a bit incredulous at himself for casting his brother on Hannibal’s mercy, but it’s the only compromise he could think of. Hannibal is actually a good therapist in a way—or Will has always thought that, in the abstract. He’s got no actual proof. But he must know the basics quite thoroughly to be able to subvert them so successfully—like abstract painters mastering classical techniques before they subvert them.

Well, he’s made his decision, and all he can do is hope it’s the right one.

He leaves Hannibal to handle the technical aspects of keeping Derek trussed up—Will has questions about what’ll happen when he has to go to the bathroom but he’s really not curious enough about the answer to actually ask. This is Hannibal’s thing and he’s happy to leave Hannibal to it.

By this time it’s morning and he calls Beverly. In the back of his mind, he’s been wondering if that text was really sent by her. He didn’t ask Derek about it because he wouldn’t trust his word on it, but he just needs to hear her voice to be sure.

“Wow, this is a full-service night out,” Beverly says, “Even comes with a wake-up call, although I might opt out of that next time. You know it’s a Saturday, right?”

“I know. I was just…I was worried about you. Not really like me, I know. I’ll let you get back to sleep,” Will says.

“Wait,” Beverly says. “How did your thing go? Did you run your idea for a compromise by Hannibal?”

“I think it went well. It’s kind of something that’ll have long-term consequences, so it might be a while before we see how it all turns out, but for now, Hannibal and I are doing well. I’m glad I talked to you about it. Thanks again,” Will says.

“Anytime, Will! I don’t know if you remember this, but Hannibal got both of our bills when he picked you up. So like, anytime, man. I don’t mind eating and drinking for free for hours with a friend who only needs the most basic advice in return,” Beverly says.

By the time Will disconnects the call, Hannibal has come upstairs. He’s moving around the kitchen making something simple for breakfast. All of the stress of the past few weeks has fallen away from him and he’s moving around the room with new energy. Will feels, for maybe the first time in his life, like he’s been a good partner to someone else. He might have made a questionable choice by giving Derek’s care over to Hannibal, but he’d made Hannibal happy, and he’s optimistic that it’ll turn out okay in the end.

Well, it’ll be interesting, anyway.

Hannibal gestures to an iPhone on the counter. “I opened it downstairs using your brother’s face and turned the security features off. You should make sure that he didn’t text anyone where he was going, and then take the battery and SIM card out. Since he’s been staying on this same block it shouldn’t be a problem that he had the phone here the night he disappeared. If the police can glean that information they’ll likely just think he returned to Margery’s to get some things before leaving town. Don’t destroy any of the components—we might need them later.”

The last person who had contacted Derek was Will, and he hadn’t called or texted anyone since that last call. He dismantles the phone as Hannibal had instructed, and sits down at the kitchen bar to eat his protein scramble. Hannibal joins him, after leaving Derek’s portion on the stovetop to stay warm.

“So how long will Derek stay here in the house?” Will asks.

“For a while. I think it’s appropriate for you to spend some time getting to know your brother, and I also want you to monitor his therapy by sitting in occasionally and reading my notes. At a certain point he’ll become more independent and he’ll leave the house. I have a few properties where he can stay.”

“Just let me know you need from me,” Will says. “I trust you.”

Hannibal smiles. “I truly believe that now. I’ve never felt this before, but I hope I can live up to that trust. Be worthy of it, instead of using it as carte blanche to do whatever I like.”

“My trust is something different than say, Alana’s trust. Because she trusts the character you play. She trusts your reputation and your impeccable credentials. She doesn’t really know you to trust you. I think I know you better than anyone, and I trust you. The real you,” Will says.

“Thank you for that gift,” Hannibal says. “I know that it is, indeed, a gift, and nothing I’ve actually earned. It’s a generous thing you’ve given me, and I’ll work to be worthy of it.”

Will nods. Maybe he’ll be able to tame this tiger after all.

Epilogue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After several months, many cases with Jack, and many dinners together, Hannibal and Will finally move in together.

Their house is a bit more urban than Will would choose for himself, but it's closer to work. It's a bit less in the thick of things than Hannibal would choose for himself, but his macabre decorating choices somehow look a lot more sensible and hunting-cabin-sheek than they ever did in his old place.

Will is unsurprised to learn that the Baltimore elite are still happy to come to their place for dinners, especially since the distance means Hannibal and Will open up guest bedrooms for them. Instead of the distance forcing Hannibal from the life of a social butterfly, an invitation to his place has become even more sought after.

The property stands near a wildlife preserve that Hannibal is as pleased about as Will. Will suspects that the dogs and Will's obvious preference for the outdoors are a kind of alibi for him; his persona wouldn't have supported the idea that he needed space in the wilderness, but now that he has Will, his preference won't raise any suspicion.

They haven't resolved the issue of Miriam Lass, but it's hardly the worst concession Will has had to make. Derek now stays with Miriam. They're both tethered to the house Hannibal has left them in by his psychological means of influence. Hannibal claims that he's making progress with Derek, though Derek still demands to be let go every time Will sees him. Will sees Derek, but it's not possible for him to see Miriam. She still has a role to play, and Will doesn't want to be mistaken for the Chesapeake Ripper when she finally plays her part.

Will's father has purchased his old house in Wolf Trap, and that's where they're headed now. Will leans his head on the Bentley's window and watches the familiar scenery of his old road zoom by.

"Do you think I'm a bad son for doing this?" Will asks.

Hannibal laughs. "Your father didn't have to agree to take the dogs."

"No, but maybe I should stick around. He just moved here and we're taking off."

"It is very convenient that he bought the house and moved closer. He hinted the other day that dogs are easier than kids, but he wouldn't be opposed to babysitting those, either."

Will straightens. "No Hannibal. We're not doing that."

"What if another orphan came into our lives? Not one we'd have to hide from people, like Abigail, but someone we could shape and mold from childhood to adulthood," Hannibal says.

Will is pretty sure Hannibal doesn't mean it. "I don't know. I like the grandiose way you play god. Having a kid is a pretty banal approximation, don't you think?"

Hannibal glances over, his expression playful. "You know I'll do anything for you, darling. Just let me know and I'll make it happen."

Will can't imagine the machinations Hannibal would have to undertake to make something like that happen. Not good. He trusts his already-a-murderer brother to Hannibal's ministrations, and Abigail, but some innocent child? That would never happen. But he just nods to let Hannibal know he understands.

Hannibal sighs. "To answer your question, I think your father will be very happy to look after the dogs while we're in Europe. He doesn't seem to need a whole lot of filial attention, either, considering he didn't see you for years. And he's told me more than once how happy he is that you asked him to help out by taking the dogs. They're very lucky doggies, to have a grandpa who loves them."

Will smiles. Who knew at the end of all this Hannibal would be speaking baby talk about dogs and considering the feelings of his probably-one-day father-in-law?

"Well, it's not like I could ask Alana," Will says. Alana had never lodged any complaints against Hannibal, and she seemed to view them with less suspicion now than she had before, but it didn't seem that they'd ever regain the closeness they'd had before. Perhaps she would have gone back to her friendship with Hannibal, but Will had quietly forbidden Hannibal that. He didn't want to be the kind of man who told his romantic partner who he could and couldn't be friends with, but considering Hannibal had slept with her specifically to manipulate Will (albeit, in another universe), Will didn't feel like his request was too out of line. Hannibal had acquiesced without argument, though Will imagined he felt a bit like someone whose partner was mad at him for something they'd dreamed he did. Will had taken it as a given that he was also expected not to pursue any friendship with her, especially considering out of the two of them, Will was the one who'd actually kissed her—although he didn't feel the need to make that understanding explicit. Alana didn't really seem to have any interest in renewing her friendship with Will either way.

Will wasn't finished fretting. "And what about my students? I mean six months is a long time. Do you think they'll replace me if I'm gone that long?"

"Even if they do, Uncle Jack will still want you back to consult. And you can do whatever you want to do, Will, including fishing or running your very own dog rescue. I would finance any dream of yours," Hannibal says. "They know how valuable you are as a teacher, but if they did let you go and you want to continue teaching, we could always move somewhere else and you could get another job. You already teach at the most prestigious place in your particular field, but a different institution wouldn't necessarily be a step down."

"Do you ever worry about spoiling me?"

Hannibal laughs. A delicious huff of breath and a half-smile Will knows hardly anyone ever sees but him. "I worry I'm not spoiling you enough. I could be far more extravagant if you would allow me to."

Will rolls his eyes. “I’ll get back to you when I pick out the tiara I want, if that’ll make you feel better.”

“I would like to see you in diamonds. A single stud in each ear. You’d be too gorgeous for words. But I know better than to ask for such things.”

Will frowns. It really wouldn’t be that bad. Even in public, he could probably wear earrings. Not quite a collar of ownership, but very assuredly something that marked Will publically as Hannibal’s property. Everyone who knows him knows he wouldn’t wear anything like that except at Hannibal’s urging. He shrugs. “I mean, if it would mean something to you…I could get my ears pierced.”

Hannibal appears pleased but doesn’t say much more about it. Will can’t tell whether he just played into the man’s hands, if Hannibal hadn’t meant it, or if it’s just Hannibal being understated as usual.

One of Will’s favorite things about Hannibal is how quiet his emotions are. He’s as effusive and eloquent as a poet writing opera when they have a discussion about their feelings for each other, but when they’re just two men in a room, Will is never overwhelmed by Hannibal’s emotions. It’s rare for Will to be able to relax with another person without getting sensory and emotional overload from them. Molly had been a pretty uncomplicated woman, but if she’d vented about work or Walter’s school, it had been almost too much for Will to bear.

It had been hard, too, to be the recipient of all of Walter’s negative feelings about Will that were tangled up with missing his dead father. Even his positive feelings about Will had been hard. It's not just his mistrust of Hannibal that makes him reluctant to sign up to be someone else's parent.

Hannibal, however, is like a blank space, but in a good way. He could be a companion to Will without overwhelming his feelings. Will never thought he’d have that; the ability to be with someone, not be lonely, and still feel at peace.

Strange to think that a serial killer would be the one to bring peace into his life. And he very much likes his life. Though he’s taking a holiday from it, knowing he can come back and see Jack and the others at any time—that he doesn’t have to be a fugitive—is an unexpected gift.

“Can this last, Hannibal? Or does a part of you want to burn it all down?”

Hannibal looks over and grins slyly. “What does it matter if we burn it all down, if you can go back and make it right again?”

Will laughs, but only because he knows Hannibal is joking. There’s no indication Will can ever go back to his life before the coma—or after the fall—and he wouldn’t want to. Lately, there’s been a feeling at the pit of his stomach that his happiness could be taken from him in an instant, either if someone finds out about their nocturnal activities, about the people Hannibal has hidden away, or if Will gets unstuck in time again.

“Endless possibilities but also endless uncertainty,” Will mutters.

“Please, let me anchor you to this place,” Hannibal says. He takes Will’s hand and squeezes it.

Please, let the anchor hold, Will thinks as the car comes to a stop.

Chapter End Notes

I am finished this story but will likely turn this into a series and have some shorter entries in this universe at some future date, though not any time soon (although who knows? Inspiration can strike at any time). Thank you to all my readers who followed a WIP that wasn't the most consistently updated WIP in the world, and all the people who commented as they read. Your encouragement helped me keep my interest in this story. It was a lot of fun :)

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